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DAMN THE TORPEDOES

Full speed ahead!

Okay, so good warnerds know that's not quite the correct quote, but you get the idea. Full speed ahead could easily be the motto of the team behind World of Warships, especially as the game celebrates its sixth anniversary.

I last saw Philip Molodkovets in his hometown of Saint Petersburg, which now seems like a treasured memory in these locked down times! And this issue we catch up with him again (though with less vodka) digitally to look back at the game and the state of Wargaming and development.

And speaking of lockdown, it means a lot of us are probably sitting at our home computers a *whole* lot more... so look after your back (and your butt) with a roundup some of our favourite gaming chairs!

David Hollingworth

"... look after your back (and your butt) with a roundup some of our favourite gaming chairs!"

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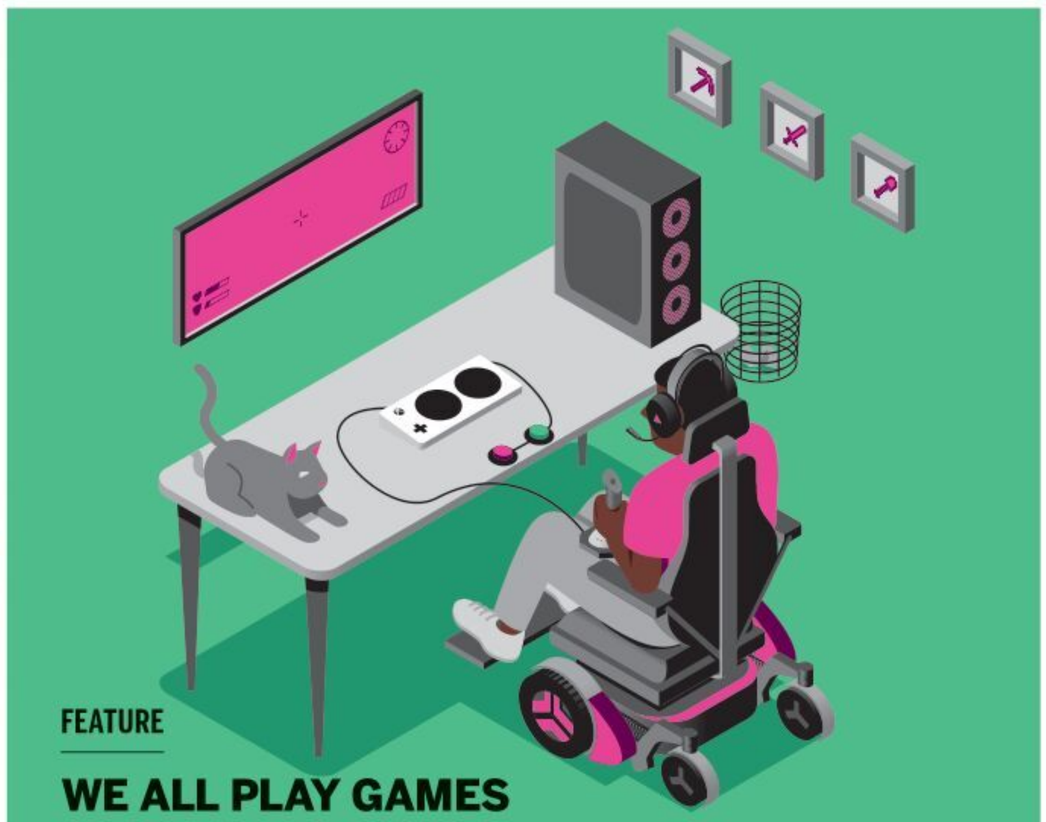

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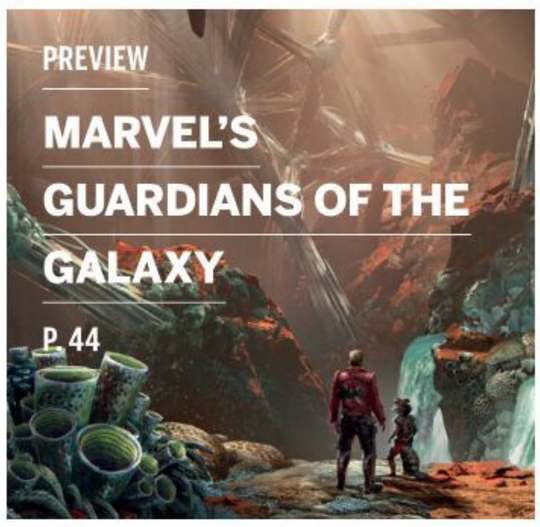

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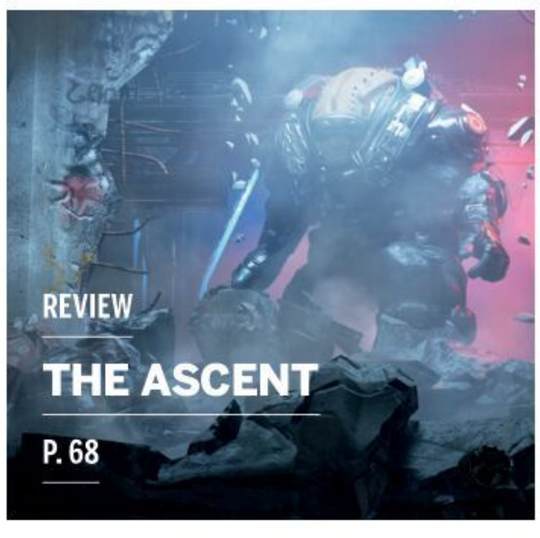

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CALL OF DUTY: VANGUARD IS A POST-WW2 GAME ABOUT HUNTING DOWN HITLER'S SUCCESSOR

Vanguard's campaign follows a four-person squad and the "birth of special forces."

After months of rumors and speculation about just what's going on with Call of Duty this year, Call of Duty: Vanguard has officially been confirmed as the next mainline game in the series. Vanguard takes the series back, for the seventh time, to World War 2 with a campaign that lead developer Sledgehammer Games hopes will feel new to the series.

Sledgehammer, which hasn't led development on a CoD game since 2017's Call of Duty: WW2, is shaking things up by setting most of the campaign after the official end of the war. Hitler is dead, the Nazis have lost, but the Allies learn of a troubling plan (called "Project Phoenix") to somehow facilitate "Hitler's successor."

What the heck does that even mean? Your guess is as good as mine. Vanguard's main villain is the fictional Heinrich Freisinger (inspired by the real Gestapo operative Heinrich Müller). In 1945, Hitler technically had a real successor: Karl Dönitz, who immediately surrendered and was eventually convicted of war crimes at the Nuremberg trials. So evidently there's at least a warping of history happening here.

Skyrim is getting a free fishing update and a new Anniversary Edition later this year

The new edition will feature the Skyrim Special Edition and a mountain of Creation Club content.

It's been almost ten years since the launch of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, and to mark the big birthday Bethesda Softworks is releasing the Skyrim Anniversary Edition on November 11 — the game's actual ten-year anniversary. The Skyrim Anniversary Edition will include the Special Edition version of the game, a remastered release with high-resolution textures, upgraded visual effects, and the Dawnguard, Hearthfire, and Dragonborn add-ons, along with more than 500 pieces of Creation Club content: new quests, dungeons, bosses, weapons, spells, and more. If you haven't played Skyrim yet and you're looking to jump in, this is definitely the place to do it. And if you have already played it, you're not being left out, as the Anniversary Edition will be available as an upgrade for the Special Edition as well. A free next-gen upgrade will also launch on the same day, although it's not clear yet whether it will come to PC (I've asked) and — this is the big one — Bethesda is adding fishing to the game, too. Finally — real fishing!

Intel's Xe Super Sampling might give Nvidia's DLSS a run for its money

Xe Super Sampling (XeSS) is Intel's open-source answer to Nvidia's DLSS and AMD's FSR. One of the most significant differences is that XeSS will work with any GPU, not just Intel's future Alchemist video cards. It was shown off at Intel's recent Architecture Day 2021. The real-time demo showed XeSS in action by rendering at 1080p and then upscaling it to 4K.

The Quake remaster is available now

The rumored Quake remaster released on Steam and the Microsoft Store for $10 today—surprise! And if you already own the original Quake on Steam, you'll get the update for free. The Quake remaster comes with 4K and widescreen resolution support, enhanced models, dynamic and colored lighting, anti-aliasing, depth of field, and a new theme song from Trent Reznor, who composed the original soundtrack.

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INSIDE THE ACTIVISION BLIZZARD LAWSUIT

There's something rotten at ActiBlizzard's heart...

On July 20th, California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing filed a lawsuit against Activision Blizzard collecting "numerous complaints about unlawful harassment, discrimination, and retaliation" at the company. Employees the DFEH spoke to said Activision Blizzard has a "frat boy" culture that's been a "breeding ground for harassment and discrimination against women." In the period since, more than 3,000 Activision Blizzard employees have signed an open letter to management speaking up for victims and making a call for "official statements that recognise the seriousness of the allegations and demonstrate compassion for victims of harassment and assault." On top of this, a number of senior developers have left the company.

It's been a dramatic period for Activision Blizzard, including a response plan from CEO Bobby Kotick and a work stoppage by hundreds of employees. And this is just the beginning: Court proceedings are still pending and could last for months or years if the case goes to trial.

WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT FROM THE LAWSUIT ITSELF?

The Department of Fair Employment and Housing's lawsuit has started a public maelstrom for Activision, but a court hearing could be weeks or months off—if the case goes to a trial at all.

"I don't see either case as going to an actual trial," lawyer Kellen Voyer tells PC Gamer, referring to the DFEH's case against Activision Blizzard as well as one it filed against Riot Games. "Typically the parties will settle out once the defendant has a better idea of the evidence being brought by the state and the strength of its case. The current negative press... is another reason why the companies will not want to go through a long, public trial."

The DFEH's news page shows a number of settlements from the past three years to resolve discrimination and harassment cases, for sums ranging from US$50,000 to US$6.2 million. Voyer points out that a sexual harassment case brought by the state is stronger than a case from an individual, partially becasue it's public rather than private arbitration. (Ending mandatory arbitration in Activision Blizzard contracts is one of the demands listed by employees who participated in the July 28 work stoppage.)

Because the DFEH's investigation into Activision Blizzard must have been ongoing for some time, Voyer says the lawsuit is a way to publicly push Activision Blizzard into a settlement. The DFEH filing does request a jury trial, but this is standard practice and doesn't rule out the likely possibility of a settlement before trial begins.

"Activision Blizzard will fight tooth and nail to avoid [a trial] as I would expect a jury (especially in California) to come down hard on the company," Voyer says. " A settlement is likely before it gets to that stage."

Going after a company as big as Activision Blizzard gives the DFEH a chance to make a public spectacle; even if it doesn't have strong enough evidence to push the company into a multi-million dollar settlement, it could have significant ramifications.

"To make an example of a company, even through the filing of the case and the negative PR that results for the company, will hopefully effectuate change through deterrence: by putting companies on notice that there are real, material, ramifications for failing to address toxic culture," Voyer says.

It's still possible that this case goes to trial. If it does, the DFEH will likely be pushing for big monetary penalties and for Activision Blizzard to open itself up to oversight as it enacts plans to repair its workplace issues.

If Blizzard won at trial, it would likely push for no monetary damages and, in Voyer's words, "the usual corporate, general promise of 'we will change and do better.'"

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THE GREEN DEATH

Peripeteia is shaping up to be the most memorable cyberpunk game Poland has ever produced. Get ready to party like it's 199X...

James Cottee does not endorse any kind of nuclear strike on Finland, or any other country.

The cult hit shooter Cruelty Squad has grossed over a million dollars and reawakened demand for strange and challenging new games. Games like Peripeteia, a cyberpunk RPG shooter set in an alternate timeline where social malaise and bionic implants collide.

Peripeteia hit its Kickstarter goal in just three days, and I had the chance to talk to three of its lead developers, who go by the handles 'Shodanon', 'Snake', and 'Shackleton'.

Shackleton wanted to stress that the main thing their game will offer players is a kind of crackling green sensory overload, or as he put it, the *immersive* part of an immersive sim. "Peripeteia is very much about being able to literally feel the concrete, hear the stagnant water flowing into a pot-hole, and smell the rust of a crumbling post-Soviet dystopia. We're very proud of our expansive, sprawling and yes, disorientating levels."

Their team seeks to surpass the staid limits of cyberpunk, a genre that is in something of a rut. "It's become packaged and resold just like the societies it's meant to be critiquing. We offer something different: a take on the genre that genuinely attempts to provoke, and move past a lot of the more pedestrian questions recent games have posited. A setting and implications that will unnerve, will scare you."

Peripeteia offers truly gargantuan levels with free traversal up and across any structure, and as Shodanon pointed out, it won't be holding your hand. "It's a return to the immersive sim design philosophy as it was before streamlining and focus group 'appealing to a broader audience'. It's raw and it's punk, it's challenging, it respects the player's agency and it is the closest thing those that remember Deus Ex 1 and System Shock 2 so dearly will get to that classic formula in a modern game."

The dev team is distributed around the world, but at its core this is a Polish production. Peri is set in a world where the quack theory of Lysenkoism was adopted wholesale, with disastrous environmental results. Yet perhaps its biggest selling point will be its huge arsenal of exotic weapons. They didn't really have to make much up due to the abundance of bizarre prototypes developed by the Poles during the Cold War. Shodanon cited the example of the Lantan: "It's an unwieldy hunk of metal that experimented with caseless ammunition and modular design. Back in the 70s. In a Warsaw Pact country. Following in the footsteps of Deus Ex, we have looked into weird tech conspiracy theorists claimed to have existed during the Cold War, but that's all that can be shared without spoiling the game."

The player will take control of a depressed ex-military cyborg, yet her bitter struggle is a tad incongruous with the Tetris-like inventory management system and Vault Boy-inspired icons modelled on the cult Hungarian comic strip 'Jucika'. Snake isn't surprised that this seems jarring to gamers on the other side of the old Iron Curtain. "The west tends to misunderstand that in the east, humour is often mixed with dark overtones. Not to say Peri will ever have a humorous atmosphere, but we understand the need for light to contrast dark."

Shodanon confirmed that the grimdark setting will be riddled with off-beat content, pointing out that the protagonist will be consuming vast quantities of aspic, a jelly-like foodstuff filled with meat. "Our artist worked very hard to recreate some of the most iconic Polish designs from the time of socialism that we're very nostalgic for, like the Frania washing machine and undecipherable contraptions like Slav juicers or the Remoska/Prodige oven. His greatest work is an even more cursed version of the most uncomfortable chair you'll ever sit in, the Model 366."

This commitment to bizarre technologies extends to their production pipeline: the game's maps are made in Hammer, Valve's level editor, and then run in Unity. This gives the levels a unique look; Peripeteia is often mistaken for a Source Engine game.

With its intense aesthetic and pitch-black themes, many are likening Poland's Peripeteia to the Finnish-made Cruelty Squad; the trio were divided on whether this is a fair comparison. Shackleton pointed out that it's a mistake to take its jarring visuals at face value. "The creator of Cruelty Squad would contend that while a lot of people say his game depicts themes of ugliness or satire of current events, it's actually a game about beauty and light. At the very least, we can say, that Peri is about finding beauty in ugly things. We're big Cruelty Squad fans."

Snake was less pleased with the comparison: "I think Finland should be nuked."

I think he was joking. But with that inscrutable Eastern Bloc banter, it's hard to say for certain...

A demo of Peripeteia is out now on Steam. The full game will launch in September 2022.

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TWO POINT TOWER DEFENSE

When game genre mashups teach you how to play.

Recently, I had to have a small surgical procedure. I queued at reception, sat on a bench, got admitted to a ward, chatted with a nurse (who totally had the Bedside Manner spec) and had my fluid analysed. The guy with the scalpel removed a rubber duck and I was discharged with a pleasant sounding ping. A cure icon and several thousand dollar payment floated peacefully above my head. Thank goodness this took place in a hospital someone else was running. It's rare anyone emerges from my Two Point Hospital's surgery alive, let alone cured.

Why? Turns out that I've been playing this game very badly, despite clumsily forcing three stars across the base game. It hasn't helped that I've engaged with the expansion packs in a bemused and inconsistent fashion. The Topless Mountain level of Pebberley Island flummoxed me so thoroughly that I had to ask Two Point Expert, Jemma (gamertag: urbanneurosis), for help. I like tower defence and I like Two Point Hospital. Do I like them together? I certainly like how much I've learned from this unlikely combination, but I'm not sure I'm having fun, as yet.

Jemma says, "Topless Mountain is brutal, unforgiving and unrelenting. Say goodbye to happy staff and high reputation." She warns she spent up to 100 hours attempting it around 50 times before finally surviving 42 waves for the final achievement. The premise is that ever-larger contingents of patients arrive, like a mega-emergency, but where all 85 of them are suddenly queuing at reception and every diagnosis room thereafter. If you can't process them very quickly, you're paying staff (at the beginning, or end, of the process) to stand around.

I started training doctors during their 'treatment lull', which is how I discovered there's a Diagnosis III?! In fact, there's a Diagnosis V. I had never recruited someone with greater than Diagnosis II, and so had assumed higher tiers of this spec didn't exist. Who has time for min-maxing during the relentlessness of a regular level? I loved that I now had the time to try. As Jemma notes, "Wait until you find out what else goes to level V." But, staff with five specs are expensive. I failed at waves 15-20 several times, entirely no longer able to break even.

The level incentivises 'being good'. If you can maintain a streak of 10 cures in a row, you are rewarded with a 50% boost to all income. I upgraded machines and crunched Treatment (which, amazingly, also goes to V) and achieved this (probably) twice, momentarily, in 15 hours of play. Jemma (having scrutinised screenshots) also attributes my continued failure to a too-high diagnosis threshold, "stragglers" and their want to use my (superfluous) cafe. Reading between the lines, she wants me to 'be evil'; jack up the prices, send the hopeless home.

I was surprised that Two Point Hospital became 'tower defense' in the Pebberley expansion. I think, as with most 'real-time strategy/management' games, what I really want is to play in a way that is perfect, all of the time. Now that I know my surgeon can specialise all the way to tier V, I'm desperate to try this. The lack of pressure, and more time for training, on Topless Mountain was only an illusion, thanks to the generous starting budget. I'm going to return to the early surgery levels and work on training. Can patients survive the removal of their rubber duck? Maybe they can.

Meghann O'Neill, is looking forward to becoming the teacher of the giant pizza class in Two Point Campus, the next in the series, due for release in 2022.

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Special Report

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VIDEODAMES

The grandma gamers of the **GRAND DAMES.**

Shirley Curry, the '*Skyrim* Grandma', became a YouTube celebrity in her 80s. Wit and a welcoming tone earned the videos where she explores *Skyrim* thousands of devoted followers. She's not the only grandma gamer on YouTube, though. She's one-quarter of the Grand Dames, four women who meet virtually once a month to record a livestream tea party. They have their own merch, including branded teacups, and a following who see their age not as a novelty but a feature. They bring a huge amount of life experience to their videos, and aren't afraid to speak their minds.

"The Grand Dames started last year at PAX Online, the very first online PAX, and the title of our PAX panel was Tea With Grandma Gamers: Grandmas Talk Shit About Games," explains Dame Jessa, the organiser and informal boss of the Grand Dames. "Although maybe it didn't say 'shit', it had a bunch of cartoon curse icons."

Though 'grandma gamers' is a label they happily apply themselves, Jessa says she's never thought of herself as a gamer before now. "That's because there's a very narrow definition for a lot of people of what that is," she says, "and also the idea of who that gamer tends to be: young, white, male. Then there's the negative stereotypes: living in his mum's basement, unwashed – and I've been to PAX West, so I know the unwashed part. Merrie, back me up." "Truth!" shouts Dame Merrie, the Texan of the group.

"Truth," Jessa laughs. "I hadn't smelled some smells like that since I'd been to Paris, there were some *heady* smells there. But anyway, seriously though, I'm learning that I love identifying as a gamer now. However, I still see myself primarily as a storyteller who uses games as the tool to tell the story, rather than being a gamer who plays games to win them, beat them, that kind of thing."

Her ideal game for making stories is *The Sims 2*, which she's been playing since 2004. "I was single at the time and I just remember that I played *The Sims 2*, when it first came out, every night," she says. "Pretty much every single night unless I had some other plans – which I really didn't – for a year maybe? And I had this whole long, wonderful mystery story. There was a murder mystery, I kind of did Agatha Christie in *The Sims 2* complete with a dead body."

Dame Merrie prefers games that tell their own story and praises *Borderlands 2*, especially the fan-beloved Tiny Tina DLC. "When I finished it and the credits are rolling, I was just sobbing," she says. "I was crying. It brought out that much emotion in me, and I felt every bit of her pain. It was like, 'Oh my god, I can't believe y'all did that to me.' When a game can bring that out, and you're just crying! I think I did scream and cry as bad as Tina, but I guess I get very emotionally invested in the storyline."

Shirley, on her mod

"The thing that I kind of disliked, and I haven't said anything to the developers because they're so good, but I think she says, 'Hold on there, tiger!' too much. I mean, she says it for various things. Even when she runs into the character. At least Lydia and some of the others would say, 'Ow!' Like it was my fault they ran into me."

Shirley as she appears in her *Skyrim* mod.

AWESOME FOURSOME *The Grand Dames*

DAME SHIRLEY
"People get on my comments and say, 'How many times have you beat *Skyrim*?' I absolutely hate that phrase."

DAME JESSA
"I've always been drawn to story- based games... I say that I'm a gamer until somebody creates a holodeck."

DAME MERRIE
"My first game was *Pong*. We had the Atari console at home and I sat there all weekend with the little paddles."

DAME BRITTA
"If it's cosmetic [DLC] I have no interest in it whatsoever. My fashion sense is very low."

TOP: Merrie models the official merch. Jessa is the group's benevolent mastermind and apparently a druid.

ABOVE: Shirley meets Todd Howard, creative director of *Skyrim*.

ELDER SCROLLS

When I talk to the Dames their fourth member is Britta, a New Zealander who loves JRPGs. This will prove to be her last month with the group, however, as she's retiring from livestreaming. "I think we are all old enough here, us ladies, to know that the moment you lose interest in something you've got a problem," she says when the subject of burnout comes up. "All of us never have a problem pursuing our interests and that's what keeps us going every day. Yeah, we know there's only so many days in a life. That becomes very clear as you get older and you jolly well make the most of it."

While the other dames play a variety of games, Shirley's devoted to *Skyrim*. Though you'll occasionally see her play *Ark*, or a horror game while wearing a skull mask for a Halloween 'Shirley after midnight' special, the open-endedness of Bethesda's RPG keeps her coming back. "I don't rush through the game just seeking quest after quest till I get to the end of the main quest," she says. "There's so much more to the game."

The popularity of Shirley's videos brought her to the attention of Bethesda, who plan to base a character on her in The Elder Scrolls VI. There's also a Shirley mod for *Skyrim* that adds her as a follower who tells stories based on adventures she's had in her videos, and which she recorded the dialogue for.

These loyal mod-makers, YouTube followers, Patreon patrons, and PAX audiences enjoy spending time with the Grand Dames both in games and out of them. But why now in particular? Jessa has a theory, "This last year we had a global pandemic and it took away from people, *early*, a lot of their grandparents. A lot of people lost their grandparents last year. And when we started the Dames, I wasn't thinking about that at all. I mean, before the Dames even started we did the PAX panel, Britta and I were at the panel and both of us were very surprised how many people said, 'Oh, this reminds me of my grandma.'"

"I KIND OF DID AGATHA CHRISTIE IN THE SIMS 2 COMPLETE WITH A DEAD BODY."

My apologies if that made you cry like Merrie at the end of a *Borderlands* DLC, but it's an aspect of why the grandma gamers matter right now. And they're only going to get more relevant. "We're a variety of ages, but we're paving the way," Merrie says. "All these 30-year-old gamers are someday gonna be 60, 70, 80. And they're going to know that we're already doing it, and you don't have to stop just because you're retired." ■

Jody Macgregor

A COLLECTION ASIDE

Sydney's latest Covid lockdown feels like Groundhog Day for MEGHANN O'NEILL, which may explain the time loops in this collection. Some of these games are very repetitive. And, although there's a mix of challenging and straightforward experiences, they're (almost) all very short. Who has time to concentrate on longer games when there's kids needing help with schoolwork every five minutes? We hope you'll find a tiny game to enjoy within, whether you're staying safe inside, or gaming between back-to-back social engagements. Totally not jealous at all.

ESSAYS ON EMPATHY
DEVELOPER Deconstructeam **PRICE** $28.95
AVAILABILITY Released **WEBSITE** https://essaysonempathy.com/

AAA developers aren't always good about sharing aspects of their process, sometimes even years after their game has shipped. Indie developers vary. Many are secretive until release, others are extremely generous when offering ideas and insight, especially to other developers, if not always with press. Essays on Empathy is a rare treat. Each of these tiny games has a neat, detailed interview with three Deconstructeam developers. Everything is on the table for discussion, including art, music, design, even the wider social context in which they are creating.

A quick scan of coverage suggests many game reviewers similarly appreciate this collection, while a number of players don't. Most of these games were made for game jams, including Ludum Dare, and there are legitimate criticisms to be made about the lack of polish, and the bugs. If you want ten games, there's a bundle for you elsewhere. This is for players more interested in process, artistry and stories. I (personally) love how small scope games can focus clearly on one, limited aspect of play or context, so that's another positive for me, too.

The first thing I did, on opening the collection, was to skim through all of the blurbs to find what I wanted to play first. Behind Every Great One is described as "the toughest game" because of the way it depicts (in the developers' words) "abusive relationship dynamics". The accompanying video explains that this is personal content for developers, based on lived experiences. I was curious to see why they spoke about the game so sadly. It's not that they were reluctant to share it, more that they regretted its very existence. It's certainly honest.

I'm not sure if Behind Every Great One is an "empathy game". It is a tale of a married couple. Certainly, I wouldn't tolerate Gabriel's behaviour, as a mature adult. He's a moody visual artist. But I did tolerate this kind of thing in my first few relationships. I suppose you'd say that it's not always clear what distinguishes a thoughtless comment from verbal abuse. The story combines sweeter moments with criticism. The quality of your housework is often under fire. Sometimes you want to "make love", other times there is undue pressure. It's quite exhausting.

Tensions rise when Gabriel is injured and his parents come to stay. I wouldn't generally describe myself as a spiteful person, but smoking in front of a disapproving mother-in-law made me smile. I think my enduring impression of Behind Every Great One is that I'm glad my (real) husband does a lot of housework. I didn't experience the kind of horror the designers suggested players might, but I get it. Boundaries and expectations in relationships are confusing. It's not OK to be mean. Extended family should never visit, because they make everything worse.

Several games in the bundle centre around family and relationships. Engolasters is about being embroiled in an alien conspiracy, while your family quietly implodes without you (if you actually try to spend ten minutes investigating, not to mention avoid bleeding to death). For goodness sakes, people, talk to each other and (I don't know) maybe do some housework? The Bookshelf Limbo, by contrast, is a relaxing experience in which you choose a comic for your dad's birthday. You don't meet your dad, but you learn a lot about him by rejecting reading material.

I was expecting to just sample each tiny game, but I ended

Inspiration points: 2
Build
MAX
Bonachera:
Hey Garza, the other day at a party I told a sex robot about you and she's interested in meeting up.
My dude, you know Im not into chicks, even if they plug into the wall at night.
Does she mind kids? I have my hands full with a Tamagotchi at the moment.
I'm not sure I meet her minimum requirements.
The Show So Far
Bonachera:
Good grief...
Bonachera:
Anyway.
Bonachera:
Listen, I want to confess someth
been living with a polyamorous
months now.
Garza:
That's what they call being a tw
nowadays, huh?
Bonachera:
You don't understand. I'm in a
with two other boys and a girl
love. It's the best.
Garza:
Glad to hear you managed to fi
love and your rent problems.
Bonachera:
Hey Garza, the other day at a
sex robot about you and she's in

up playing several quite thoroughly. I'm sure I'll go and find the developers' other games soon, too. In the accompanying interviews, they often refer to The Red Strings Club, built from ideas explored in several of the collection, including Supercontinent Ltd. This time, you're a freelance cyberpunk hacker (in sneakers) confronted with a landline telephone. But don't worry, you're given instructions on how to push buttons to make a call, and the ability to impersonate people.

These elements frame a mystery that feels very rewarding to solve. You'll unravel subversive plots, undermine democracy, save victims of kidnapping, or at least do some of these things and pretend to do others, all with your feet comfortably resting on the executive's desk. It's not clear what your role in events is, or who you're working for, but you're definitely a hacker, stealing passwords and fudging security questions in a way that is logically woven into the story. I'm impressed by how simple, yet elegant, these puzzles are. The ending is really clever, too.

Another game, 11:45 A Vivid Life, generates endings based on your interpretation of the objects you find inside your body. You're a teenager who has stolen an X-ray machine and an array of surgical implements. Some pretty strange things have happened to you and you need to decide, not so much discover, why. I wouldn't generally call myself squeamish, but the warning about self-mutilation is on point. In this particular case, I enjoyed playing multiple times and then looking at the design documents to see how my choices led to each divergent ending.

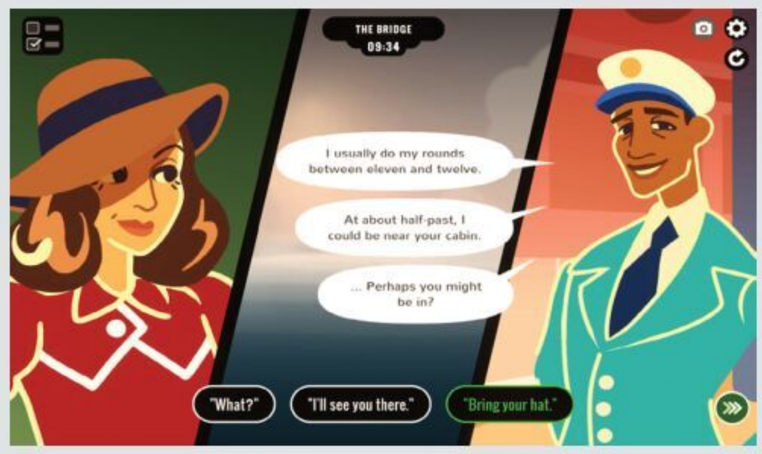
I would have liked to see something similar for Del Tres Al Cuarto (three for a quarter, or something of little value), because it's a card-game, comedy show which only pretends to be complex. You choose dialogue and play cards that lead to half decent jokes, or obviously bad jokes. It's stressful to be a mediocre comedian, especially when you notice no-one is laughing and the audience is talking over you. You're also sad, between shows, and I loved how the developers mentioned that the best jokes were meant to happen between characters in private.

It's cool to note features of these games and then have the developers explain exactly what you noticed in more detail. I didn't always experience the games precisely the way they were expecting players to, but I certainly felt emotionally connected, in the way they were striving for. In the final video, the developers mentioned they have created 33 games altogether. It's a great reminder of the value of jamming, especially because they are able to so clearly link systems, art, diegetic sound and story to successful aspects of their larger games, and overall process.

I've been trying to think of a way to concisely summarise Essays on Empathy and I can't shake the word, "pretentious". It has such a negative connotation. If something is pretentious, it's trying to seem more important than it is. With the interviews, assets and curatorial presentation, I'd say Essays on Empathy only seems at all "pretentious" because these games have been given the rare and special treatment (I think) all games deserve. I suspect this collection won't be for everyone, but it was definitely for me, and for people who appreciate insight into the games that move them.

A collection aside

Clarissa is in tears over my husband.
I know what you did to him.
I know!
"Are you talking about Malcolm?"
"Clarissa, have you seen Malcolm?"
"Clarissa, that's enough."


THE BRIDGE
09:34
I usually do my rounds between eleven and twelve.
At about half-past, I could be near your cabin.
... Perhaps you might be in?
"What?"
"I'll see you there."
"Bring your hat."

OVERBOARD!

DEVELOPER Inkle Ltd. **PRICE** $21.50 **AVAILABILITY** Released **WEBSITE** https://www.inklestudios.com/overboard/

The murderer is ... me! Yay, I solved it. Weirdly, although my surname is "Villensey" and the first scene is literally me pushing my husband off a ship, it took me a long moment to understand Overboard. It's not your usual whodunnit. You're not figuring out who the murderer is, you have to get away with the murder you committed and there wasn't a lot of planning or forethought involved. It's clearly still a mystery, though. There are a lot of things that Veronica is not telling you, up front. It took me a couple of playthroughs to even sleuth out my husband's name.

Quickly, the experience becomes a time loop, like Russian Doll or Mars Underground. You're only a day's sail from your destination and there's a lot of incriminating evidence to explain, hide or murder away. If someone accuses you on a first playthrough, cosh them on the second and dispose of their body. Then, when you need something they have later, keep them alive and seduce them, on a third. Characters follow set routines; you'll find them at the same place and time, much like in The Last Express, or the Laura Bow mysteries.

Speaking of which, I had no idea how far from solving The Colonel's Bequest I was, as a child. I certainly got some bad endings, but I remember reading a walkthrough (probably twenty) years later and realising how many clues I had overlooked. The text parser recognised the verb "smell", for goodness sake. I missed a lot of cigarette smoke. Overboard is fun to play alongside (mild) spoilers. I finished it a couple of ways first, then scoured Steam's forum for things to try. There are some weird achievements to discover, for sure.

I'd like to say the game is difficult, but it's relatively straightforward; a test of your memory (or skill at discovering, then documenting, who is doing what, when). It's also easy enough to achieve a first, somewhat less evil, ending, before things get significantly more convoluted. Characters have secrets and side quests (or wild goose chases) to occupy your time. A more complete picture of what has occurred on this voyage eventually becomes clear.

My favourite character is God. He's like an in-game, in-world, hint guide. Why is he helping a murderer by suggesting how to hide evidence and drug nosy, old ladies? I think it's possible he's not actually God. In fact, at one point, he suggested I solve my current problem by killing everyone on board, which then got added to the checkbox list of goals to work towards over many games. A surprising number of people can be thrown overboard. It's not really a spoiler, I promise. It's more a comment on the kind of humour you can expect from this experience.

Overboard is a fascinating narrative experiment. It is difficult to play because turning up to a location even minutes late will foil all of your carefully planned schemes, requiring endless restarts. Developers have mitigated this in a couple of (not entirely adequate enough) ways, like with a fast forward button. I'm not sure how they could have improved upon this further. Possibly with the option for multiple saves with a clear list of conditions like, "I told Carstairs that Malcom was alive". Did I? After all, covering up a badly planned murder gets complicated, fast.

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A collection aside

DINNER WITH AN OWL

DEVELOPER BoringSuburbanDad **PRICE** Free
AVAILABILITY Released **WEBSITE** https://boringsuburbandad.itch.io/dinner-with-an-owl

I was still in the mood for mystery when I found Dinner with an Owl. I mean, he's clearly an owl, although no-one will let me say so. There's definitely dinner, too, although this game is also (ostensibly) based on a time loop, so precisely why, or how, the contents of dinner keep changing forms part of its mystique. Mr Brown's "guests" seem afraid of him, and his butler is endlessly thirsty for reasons that should become clear. It's short, but free to play and I found it extremely satisfying. More games should have literally one puzzle.

Certainly, this game's scope is very appealing. You're introduced to every character, location and interactive element almost immediately. Then it's a matter of listening carefully and figuring out a solution. As you start to solve it, the game will try to trick you, but just ignore that. At one point Mr Brown delivers clues through the menacing medium of song, in a way that channels David Bowie in Labyrinth. The music is richer than it has any right to be and the occasional animations are evocative. I love the art, even though I hate red.

"Minimalist" games are great, but they're usually mechanical, like Mini Metro. What is the tiniest amount of content an adventure game can provide that leaves you feeling like you cared about characters and solved something meaningful? Dinner with an Owl gets a little bigger each time you play, but you'll have to be observant to even notice, most of the time. Although I've played small adventures before, like Ben Chandler's early collection, and adventure game loops, like Mars Underground, I'm not sure I've played both at the same time. Enjoy it with your coffee.

THE LONGEST ROAD ON EARTH

DEVELOPER Brainwash Gang, TLR Games **PRICE** $14.50
AVAILABILITY Released **WEBSITE** http://www.thelongestroadonearth.com/

And, I was obviously still in the mood for anthropomorphic characters and songwriting when I found The Longest Road on Earth. As I finish up reviewing the indie games for this issue, Sydney is going into lockdown again. For me this is likely to mean a significantly more demanding teaching commitment, online (especially when my kids are supposed to be learning online, too). This game is exactly as challenging as I can handle right now; not at all challenging.

It's a collection of melancholy songs for which the accompanying video clips are interactive, pixel art levels. Each scene is loosely tied to song length, then embellished with looping chord progressions that evolve, texturally, over time. I actually really like having "something to do" while listening to evocative music. Teaching composition means that I'm constantly overwhelmed by every student's beautiful new creation. If this were an album, I'd have stopped listening, just because I'm always emotionally full. Of course, interactivity tricked me into feeling anyway.

I'm the mouse, staring into a coffee cup, missing someone, then cycling joyously through the countryside. Or the fox, appreciating sunlight through the leaves of a tree, in the park, on the way to tune (possibly) a moose's piano, the keys I touched then forming the motif in the next piece and the black keys becoming the silhouettes of animals, in a puddle, back in the park. By the end of the game, I don't really have a clear recollection of the music at all, just some of the repeated lyrics, "dance with me, wait for me, it'll be OK." And, it will. A game for until we can dance together again!

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World of Warships

WORLD OF

WARSHIPS SAILS INTO HISTORY

THE EPIC WARFARE OF WORLD OF WARSHIPS CELEBRATES ITS SIXTH BIRTHDAY!

By David Hollingworth

Since its launch in 2015, World of Warships has gathered over 3,000,000 players from all around the world. They are the captains of darting destroyers launching devastating torpedo attacks; they command cruisers and battleships, firing thundering broadsides at their distant foes. And they stand over the flight decks of mighty aircraft carriers and squadrons of fighters and bombers. The game came out of beta into the light of day six years ago, and a lot of the game's base systems have seen some degree of update or overhaul in that time; carriers in particular went through some massive changes a few years back, and now another great change is about to rock the boat...

I was lucky enough to be invited to preview the submarine expansions in Tokyo back in 2018, but getting the balance right for these sneaky sub-surface ship-killers has been quite the task, and they're only now getting fully released into the game.

But that's just the latest change to the game. At launch the game featured a limited number of ships from the five big powers of World War 2, but there are now 11 nations in total, fielding over 400 warships. When work on World of Warships began, the studio working on it (then called Lesta Studio, but now officially Wargaming Saint Petersburg) there were only 40 staff, but now 500 people work on the game, delivering monthly content and updates to its global audience.

And in that time, the game's followed in the footsteps of its land-based sibling, World of Tanks, and has helped raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for veteran support and charities. Similarly, Wargaming has teamed with a raft museums and preservation efforts; the company raised nearly US$500,000 towards the restoration of the USS Batfish (a Balao-class submarine that famously sank three Japanese submarines in a single 76-hour period on her sixth war patrol) and the USS Texas (a battleship that supported the D-Day lands before transferring to the Pacific theatre for the rest of the war).

To say that it's been a busy six years is a bit of an understatement, so we were happy to have the time to catch up with the game's executive producer, Philip Molodkovets, to talk about the game's evolution, and its future.

PCPowerPlay: I know that the St. Petersburg team has grown a LOT in the last six years - were you there when it was just 40 people? What was it like in those early days, and how does it feel now that you have a much larger team, and space to work in (I saw your offices for the 'new' carrier preview a few years back, and I can remember it had some space set aside for expansion!).

Philip Molodkovets: I joined World of Warships team somewhere between internal testing and Closed Alpha, so even if it was not exactly 40 people, it sounds about right. It was also the first job in the industry for me (as Community Manager), so overall, looking back, I see a lot of changes and growth – in the game itself, us as a team, and as a studio. It has been quite a ride! I feel very lucky to be a part of it – of the game and our community. As for the studio, it's not even about the office size, it's about what we've become. Today about 800 people work here on several games on several platforms. It is bigger than World of Warships now – but World of Warships is still our flagship game, and I'm sure it will always remain special for us. And, what's very important to me personally, this growth did not kill our work culture and identity – people here are still engaged and open-minded. We still can freely discuss and solve issues, bring new ideas, and shape the future of the game together.

It still feels like people doing

BOOMSTICKS
Battleships feature the heaviest artillery in the game, capable of killing smaller ships dead.

SEAGULL
Seabirds have not been added to the actual game. Losing an aircraft to bird-strike would suck.

ESCORTS
Many battleships feature spotter planes for more accurate fire. Soon they can sink subs, too!

BACKUP
Secondary guns automatically fire at anything in close-quarters. Not accurately, but it still stings!

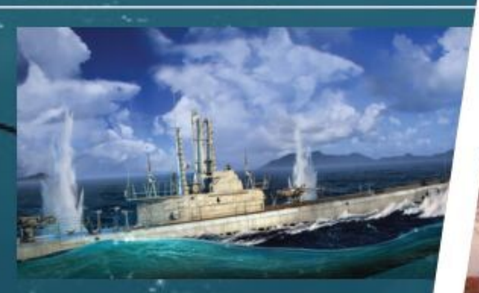
SHIPS OF DISTINCTION

A taste of naval history

THE KREIGSMARINE
The German navy was more focussed on raiding and submarine tactics in World War 2.

HMAS VAMPIRE
Commisioned in 1959, and served in the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation from 1963 to 1966.

USS MISSOURI
In 1945 the USS Missouri was the site of the Japanese surrender, and is currently a museum ship at Pearl Harbour.



what they actually love and care for. I hope this spirit will never change.

PCPP: Speaking of previews, I was also at the submarine preview event in Tokyo - which was three years ago now! I understand that submarines are still being tweaked and fine-tuned; can you give me an idea of how that system has evolved since then?

PM: It has evolved a lot, to put it mildly. We've started from the Halloween 2018 event, and since then we've had six open test iterations, one of which was conducted on our main server as a special game mode. We analysed the feedback after each test carefully and implemented a lot of changes, from minor tweaks to big overhauls of some core parts of submarine and anti-submarine gameplay.

For example, we needed something to be a limiting factor, so that a submarine will have to surface sooner or later. We started with a limited amount of oxygen, which could slowly recover on the surface. Then we switched to a battery charge, which was needed to fully unleash your submarine's attack capabilities; but depleting it didn't lead to emergency surfacing. There were several other steps in this process, but eventually we've ended up with the concept of a bit more abstract parameter – dive capacity. It unifies not only air reserve and battery charge, but overall each submarine's parameters and systems engaged in underwater "hunting", and also may be slowly recharged on the surface.

Another example would be anti-submarine warfare (ASW) tools. We started with destroyers and some other ships having depth charges, which are useful against submarines only if you get very close. But we've added an airstrike that can be called by some battleships. Also, detecting a submarine while they are submerged makes them loose dive capacity quicker; thus even ships without strong ASW armament have some tools against subs.

Now we're approaching the biggest step so far for the new class: a prolonged gaming period on the main server in two types of battle: Cooperative against bots and Ranked in PvP. This will allow everyone to try out the most recent changes and share their feedback. It's cool that you saw one of the oldest versions, so I encourage you to try this one – I think you will find how much certain things have changed rather amusing.

WE'RE APPROACHING THE BIGGEST STEP SO FAR FOR THE NEW CLASS

PCPP: Given the ongoing addition of new ships to the game, how has that game design process changed over the years? Has it become more streamlined?

Indeed. Obviously the technical side of it has seen a lot of improvements – I'm talking about things like visuals and armor modelling. Gameplay and balance wise, we've created a lot of new tools and metrics to evaluate ship performance both in combat and in terms of players' satisfaction. We take a lot more factors into account now – basically, everything that players or testers do in battle is in some way logged and taken into our statistical tools.

However, all this experience and assets are in very high demand, too, because our job has become much more difficult. With hundreds of ships in the game and dozens being added, we need to explore more

ABOVE: You can even play with the Australian Navy's own HMAS Vampire.

Above: Submarines have been through a range of iterations since inception, but are now ready for launch.

opportunities to bring something interesting and fresh, and at the same time it's more challenging to keep the system in good health and balanced. So I'd say that streamlining and evolving of the game design process for us is not just an option – it's a hard requirement.

PCPP: What would you say are some of the most important lessons about the game that you or your team have learned over the last six years? Is there anything you wish you knew then that you know now?

PM: Anyone would be happy to know how to avoid mistakes, and obviously, we've had a share of mistakes over the years. But unfortunately, some lessons can only be learned the hard way. Some of the most important lessons are connected with how to provide quality entertainment in the game, how to communicate and inform our players about our plans, how to change things we believe are to be changed, and how to balance your own opinion, player feedback and data when making decisions... How to handle difficult situations – this topic is too huge to cover in any kind of interview in detail.

The progress is amazing, but what's most important, it does not mean we should stop. We need to stay open minded and be ready to change in future. It's more about the general attitude than about a couple of specific important lessons.

PCPP: Have you seen COVID have any kind of an impact on player habits? And has it impacted the St Petersburg office at all? I'm currently writing these questions from home!

PM: We worked from home, too, for a while. But I think it was just several months, when the situation was really bad. We've been working in the office normally for the most part of the pandemic, but surely things changed for us: masks, air purifiers, sanitisers, distancing, regular tests and checks – a lot of measures were taken to make our office safe. And it worked!

We also have a very good percentage of vaccinated colleagues here – approaching 70%, I believe. I know it won't happen right away, but surely we all want this pandemic to end, finally. It's very important for our work culture to be in the studio together, to have 'offline', face-to-face communications. So as long as it's safe and allowed by local regulations, we will be working from the office.

As for the player habits, people were often forced to stay home and it inevitably affected their online activity. We did our best to provide them with good online entertainment; after all, playing video games was one of the rare ways to actually have fun with friends or forget about the pressing issues in the world for a while. We don't relax over that, because when the pandemic ends, habits may change. Who knows, maybe people will be too hungry for offline activities to play games, at least for some time. Our plan is very simple here – to keep working as hard as we can.

PCPP: What has been the one part or aspect of the game that has been your favourite over the last few years?

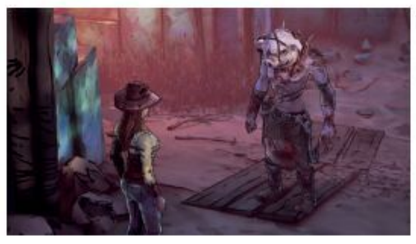
PM: Brawling. I'm not too tactical and careful when I play World of Warships. Even though it often isn't the most efficient way, nothing stops me from rushing in guns blazing, and you know, sometimes it works as intended! Sometimes it does not, but I try not to be too mad about it. Brawling – and I mean close quarter combat – in our game is thrilling, because the stakes are very high. It's easy to deal a lot of damage quickly, but it's also easy to get sunk. A good brawl of course should start in the right time and place, so the game is still strategically demanding if you play it this way.

PCPP: What does the next six years of World of Warships look like?

PM: They look pretty optimistic. The game is in good health and kicking even though we will be celebrating our six-year anniversary soon. I am absolutely sure that a lot of big new things will happen; the game will stay in active development for years and you will see not just more ships and maps, you will see new gameplay, new experiences, , and new visuals. Our backlog is not something to share publicly, but I'm not even sure six years will be enough to implement everything from it as of now!

PCPP: Thanks for your time, Philip, and what a wonderful tease to go out on! PC

Weird West



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Spring

DEVELOPER
WolfEye Studio

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

LINK
weirdwest.com

WEIRD WEST

A new perspective on immersive sims

What convinced me *Weird West* is a true immersive sim had nothing to do with the carefully prepared talking points from a recent 30-minute hands-off demo. It was a small dust devil, a random weather event, whipping through the scene.

While former Arkane founder Raphael Colantonio explains the finesse of the physics system, showing off by tossing a bottle and shooting it out of the air, a better, if less elegant example comes along.

The dust devil skirts around the edge of our bird's-eye view of a destitute barn and gunslinger protagonist, first picking up some wooden debris, then passing over a campfire. It then transforms into a raging cyclone of flame and despair, a swirling monstrosity carrying a dozen flaming planks which then light the adjacent farmhouse ablaze and send our demoist scrambling out of the way.

Where a bigger team might run into production roadblocks, WolfEye Studio's smaller team, largely made up of former Arkane talent, and zoomed out perspective allows for higher concept experimentation. For instance, in *Weird West*, you don't play one character, you play five of them. Each chapter features a new protagonist with a unique story that permanently affects the world state for the next one, until they all converge into a final chapter together.

Weird West's expressive verbs are its most exciting features though, unique to this perspective. Players can pick up and throw just about any object. There's a dedicated kick button, and your kicks do not discriminate – they'll hurt friend or foe, chicken or cow. Players can also climb around the scenery, stacking barrels to climb fences and general stores, leaping between rooftops and snooping through people's homes. But as Raph demonstrated, you can also just make your own fun, shooting bottles out of the air or kicking some empty cans around.

WE'LL GET PERKS IN RELICS AND A TON OF SKILLS TO CHOOSE FROM

WEST WORLD

We see fragments of how it fits into action throughout the demo. Raph's gunslinger does a *Max Payne*-style dive between rooftops. From above, he sneaks around some enemies and kicks a barrel towards them, shooting and igniting it as it makes contact. He climbs a fence into enemy headquarters and uses some rope he finds to climb into a well to find an alternate route in. It's about as immersive sim as immersive sims get, but with more tornadoes and an odd wrapper.

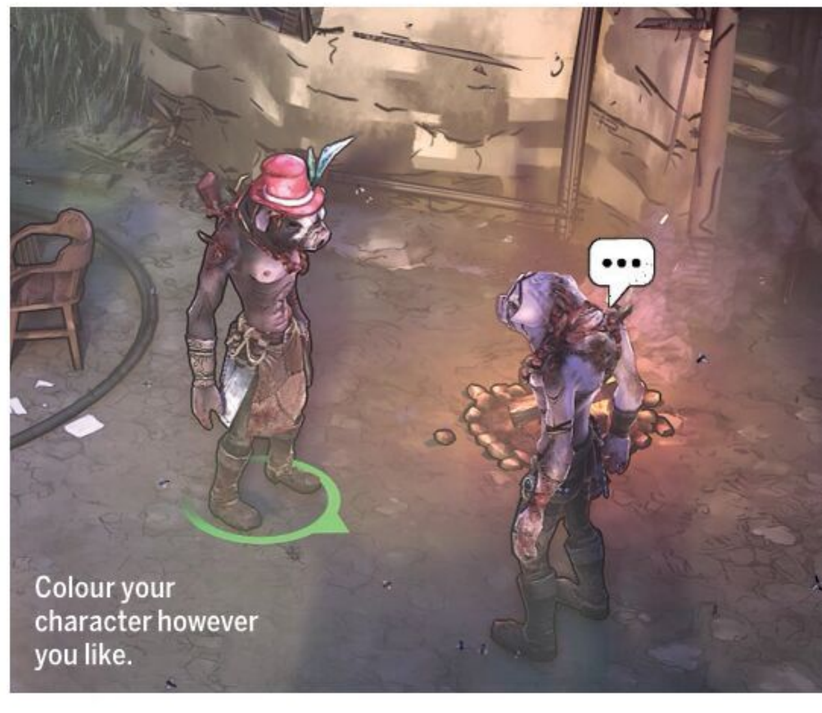
NEW INFO

Much like *Fallout 2*, you move through Weird West via a world map obscured in fog that lifts as you chart your way across it. Physical spaces are discrete, but embarking on journeys between them run a chance of triggering a random encounter, be it a coyote attack or an invitation to a coven's bloody ritual. Raph takes down a few coyotes, then looks for treasure. Shovels are another important systemic tool in *Weird West*: you can dig your way out of tricky situations and bury anything, including your dead friends and family.

We'll get perks in relics and a ton of skills to choose from that build out all sorts of playstyles between characters, but I'm curious to see how it feels and what kind of unique combat and stealth encounters the isometric perspective provides. With *Prey* fresh in my mind, I have more reasons to believe WolfEye will pull it off than not.

Weird West might be a different looking game for a team composed of developers aimed at acclaimed first-person immersive sims in the past, but it just might equal them. *Weird West* looks to be as complex an immersive sim as the best of them. It's out later this year.

James Davenport



Colour your character however you like.

ABOVE: What church looked like back when.

LEFT: The 'death from above' approach.

COMPANY OF HEROES 3 is coming to wake up the RTS genre.

by Fraser Brown

SHOCK

&AWE

This Italian airbase has turned into Hell. The seared, metal carcass of a plane dominates one of the airstrips, surrounded by craters and puddles of blood. The hangars are now just skeletons, and next to them screaming men dance as they burn. There's so much shouting, with soldiers yelling orders and warnings as they move between fleeting cover. Then, a rocket-propelled grenade, and the soldiers are gone. And through it all I have this inappropriately goofy grin on my face because, finally, I'm playing *Company of Heroes 3*.

The scene, my first fight in the campaign, is the *Company of Heroes* I remember, but with the intensity dialled way up. There's more destruction and noise and chaos, and the busyness of the battlefield speaks to the long list of new tools and units that have been flung into the meat grinder.

Among the headline attractions jockeying for position are a pair of large, dynamic campaigns set in Italy and North Africa; the ability to control the ground, air, and naval forces of both the US and UK, in tandem; an entirely optional tactical pause system, just for singleplayer; and the promise of a huge pile of customisation that will be like catnip for loadout tinkerers. It has the immense scale of a *Total War* game, complemented by Relic's experience with designing more bespoke, linear strategy games.

TEAM UP

It's the largest and most ambitious game Relic has put together, and it's been in the works for a while. Along with a scale that evokes *Total War*, the team's been inspired by another fellow Sega developer, Amplitude, borrowing its focus on the community. "They're amazing at working with players," says executive producer David Littman. "We're taking the same technology that they use, Games2Gether, and we've been using that with a private community council. So we've had a 70-player council for over three years now. And they've been playing the game for three years." These players are one of the reasons why *Company of Heroes 3* is set in Italy and North Africa – it was initially going to be in the Pacific theatre – so Relic's been getting feedback from the people who play *Company of Heroes* the most right from the beginning.

In this early build, the campaign begins in medias res, following the arrival of US and UK forces in Italy. There's already been some fighting, and I'm given one of three different approaches to select, determining what forces I get to control at the start. I have to begin in Naples, but eventually there will be other choices for starting locations. I want all the toys, naturally, so I go for the option that lets me command a mix of US and UK forces. I've got one big goal: take the indomitable Monte Cassino, opening up a way to Rome. First, though, lots of dramatic battles.

While Relic has dabbled in dynamic campaigns before, it played second fiddle to the RTS action – not so in *Company of Heroes 3*. Both layers share the spotlight and are fundamentally interconnected. What you can do in the RTS layer can be

BRICK BY BRICK *How destruction transforms a map*

BEFORE
You've got a nice little town here, nestled in the idyllic countryside. It'd sure be a shame if something were to happen to it. Something like a pitched battle happening in the middle of it, for example.

DURING
It still looks nice if you enjoy dynamic destruction. Shells leave holes in roofs, bullets demolish buildings, and vehicles get consumed by fire. Truly explosive sound design is the icing on the traumatic cake.

AFTER
Smoke blots out the sun, vehicles and soldiers have been replaced by craters, and it's devoid of life. The collapsed buildings and blackened hills tell the story of the fight and what caused the destruction.

ABOVE: Time to cook some German cuisine.

LEFT: My love of explosions means I didn't try much stealth.

replicated in the turn-based campaign, whether it's bombarding the enemy with artillery strikes or plonking down some sneaky mines to scupper troop movement.

This 'holistic loop' is one of the main pillars of *Company of Heroes 3* and makes this undeniably complex game feel significantly more intuitive. There's a level of consistency and permanence that even *Total War* hasn't achieved, and while Littman apologetically explains that the connection between the campaign and missions "simply isn't there yet", I think he's being humble. Sure, there are still gaps, and some features not working quite like I expected, but broadly this is already a game where the relationships between the systems are very strong and very apparent.

COMPANIES ARE YOUR PRIMARY UNITS THAT YOU'LL USE TO ENGAGE THE ENEMY IN REAL-TIME BATTLES

TANKS A LOT

Personalise your engines of destruction

1 Nothing says "we're the baddies" like a wee skull on your tank. Thanks for keeping it simple, Nazis.

2 This tank looks just like me the first time I went roller skating, though I didn't use quite as many sandbags.

3 That flag is going to get so muddy. Maybe this is actually an act of rebellion, like burning a flag. Good for you, crew!

4 I've been saving the best for last. Is it a bush? Is it a tank? Next time you're in the woods, keep your eyes open.

TOURIST TRAP

My army is hanging around Naples, with the sprawling Italian countryside stretched out before them. It's a chunky map, but only a small slice of the full Italian campaign that we'll get to play, along with its North African counterpart, at launch. Each discrete bit of territory offers something, whether it's more resources, another link in the supply chain, or access to air and naval forces. You don't need to take every town in Italy, but I quickly found myself being seduced by the promise of total conquest and all the goodies that come with it.

It's a fetching map, too, with lots of little cosmetic flourishes, like Vesuvius standing next to Pompeii, huge and menacing, or the striking Monte Cassino, which looks lovely even when it's surrounded by barricades, tanks, and AA guns. But

Relic's also built it with an eye towards logistics and authenticity.

"It's got that Mediterranean palette, but we're also spending a lot of time looking at the construction of each of the territories," says lead campaign designer Andrew Deneault. "We've looked at old World War II maps of rail assessments done by the Royal Engineers. So where were the rail lines? Where were the roads? Which roads were functional? As we're building the map, we're taking note of which highways the Allies used that were serviceable for tanks and things like that, which ones had hard surfaces and which ones were dirt tracks. So there's a lot of thought, a lot of love, a lot of attention being given to the map, I think mechanically as well as from the presentation layer."

ABOVE: It's OK – the building deserved it.

FLIGHT DELAYED

After spending a bit of time admiring Italy, I get back to the war. My first target is the nearest airbase, giving me access to handy things like aerial reconnaissance and paratrooper drops, which will come in handy in both the campaign map and missions. Before storming the airbase, however, I have to decide my approach.

I've got several companies and detachments at my disposal, and how I combine them will have a big impact on the battle ahead. Companies are your primary units that you'll use to engage the enemy in real-time battles, running the gamut from American airborne units to devastating Indian artillery. Across the war, they get points that can be spent on a variety of upgrades and specialisation options. They're backed up by detachments, which can still march across the map on their own, taking territory and getting into turn-based fights. They can't actually instigate real-time battles on their own, however, but if they are near or attached to a company when one starts, they can provide a range of benefits.

Being a cautious commander, I decide to bring a medical detachment with me. On the campaign map, this detachment has a healing ability, and in missions this translates to a very helpful little truck that passively heals any troops standing near it. The truck can be destroyed, of course, and I turn protecting it into a personal side mission. Battles also conjure up explicit optional objectives, like finding intel or finding and taking out a specific enemy.

The medical truck proves to be a significant boon, given that it's been a while since I played *Company of Heroes*. As handy as it is, though, it pales in comparison to the tactical pause feature. My reflexes ain't what they used to be, so the ability to pause the action at any time to issue and queue commands is a genuine lifesaver, especially when I split my forces up and find myself managing multiple fights.

EVERYONE FREEZE

It was introduced to make *Company of Heroes 3* more accessible to players of all skill levels without removing the complexity and frenetic fights the series is known for, but I think even experienced RTS players will find it useful. "Something I like about the tactical pause is that it's a different kind of payoff, queuing up a number of orders and then seeing them fulfilled," says Deneault. "Taking a piece of territory, using a grenade, pinning the target, flanking, breaching a structure – you can set up some of those more advanced inputs, and in a way that, after you unpause, you can watch it unfold and see if it works. And if it does, there's a great payoff there."

My first *Company of Heroes 3* mission is a thrill – a dramatic battle lit up by countless fires and explosions, courtesy of the airbase's many fuel-filled barrels. At one point, I have to charge across a mostly empty runway, using the occasional ditch to hide my troops, and when one isn't available, my poor medical truck. In the north, by the hangars, other soldiers duke it out with entrenched Nazis, as buildings are blown to smithereens. They get pinned down by a sniper in a tower, but smoke grenades and rockets make short work of it. Amid the fracas, I'm plonking down new

There's no time for sunbathing today, lads.

buildings near my HQ, recruiting units and upgrading my existing ones as they rank up. When my engineers get flamethrowers, that's when we really start cooking. There's so much going on that I forget all about the intel, but I still manage to take the airbase, giving me another tool to make my march north, to Monte Cassino, just a little bit easier.

The level of destruction has always been one of *Company of Heroes*' most memorable traits, so naturally Relic has given the system a lot of attention. Art director Tristan Brett and his team have worked tirelessly to create gorgeous Italian towns and villages, all so they can be mercilessly destroyed. The destruction system starts with construction, he tells me. "So we build all the internal framework of the houses, the tiles and everything are really built, so they act like the proper material and slide off the framework. So a lot of thought went into how we build the structures, before we talk about how to break them." I'll admit I do feel a little bit guilty after destroying them all. But it's just so satisfying.

FALLING APART

Every projectile feels tangible and deadly when it's pounding walls to dust, and there's a grim beauty to all the devastation. Sometimes it feels like you're building a warzone rather than destroying a town. And objects don't just have two states – they aren't simply standing or destroyed. The system is gradual and modular, telling the story of how things were blown up, whether it's a building, a tank, or a lovely garden. There have also been practical improvements, so fallen masonry can now be used as cover, and if troops are underneath when it's falling they might get crushed. If the thought of all these demolished buildings is making you feel sad, you can mitigate some of the destruction by using the new breach system to get enemies out of buildings instead of levelling them. Breaching troops will toss in a grenade and rush the enemy, or better yet, fill the interior with fire from a flamethrower. Enemies will try to flee, but that's why you stick some guys out back.

Emboldened by my first victory, I step into my second fight, a random skirmish, with a confident swagger. My arse gets thoroughly kicked. If this had been *Company of Heroes 1* or *2*, that would have been it for me, but in this World War II sandbox I have to live with my failure. Battle outcomes aren't black and white, either. While my company takes some damage, it survives, and the enemy gains no ground. In fact, it's actually taken more damage. It might have won the skirmish, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. It's also possible to completely destroy an enemy company or detachment before the battle begins. Units can exchange fire once-per-turn on the campaign map, and artillery strikes from your companies or naval support can make fast work of them, saving time and the lives of your troops.

Notably, that naval support isn't off-screen. So not only will you be able to hammer the enemy before you engage in a skirmish, you'll also be able to directly control your ships on the campaign map, moving them into a better position, or even depositing troops behind enemy lines. In this build, it's a doddle, but Relic's planning some coastal threats as well, making a journey by sea a bit riskier for the navy.

ABOVE: With air, naval, and land forces, the warmonger's toy box is massive.

RIGHT: Even when they're exploding, these Italian towns look lovely.

HIDE AND SEEK

Plenty more skirmishes will accompany the bespoke missions at launch. As an unrepentant turtler, I'm especially happy to hear that proper defensive missions will be in the mix, giving you time to set up your fortifications and lay traps.

Lead mission designer Sacha Narine tells me that he wants to give

THEY'RE GOOD COMPANY

Meet a few of the companies you'll be able to field

BRITISH ARMOURED

"The steel cavalry"

These are the lads who helped me take Monte Cassino. Great for tank-lovers, this company uses mechanised tactics and the beefy Churchill tank to soak up damage, push through the front line, and protect infantry.

BRITISH ARTILLERY

"The bravest of the brave"

This company makes use of devastating artillery strikes to soften up targets, both on the campaign map and during the RTS battles, preparing the enemy for an assault from elite Gurkha infantry.

US AIRBORNE

"We shine behind enemy lines"

Infuriate the Germans with this company's best trick: dropping paratroopers, heavy weapons, and resources behind enemy lines. It's the perfect company for taking points quickly, and it's pretty good at holding them too.

US SPEC OPS

"Never see us coming"

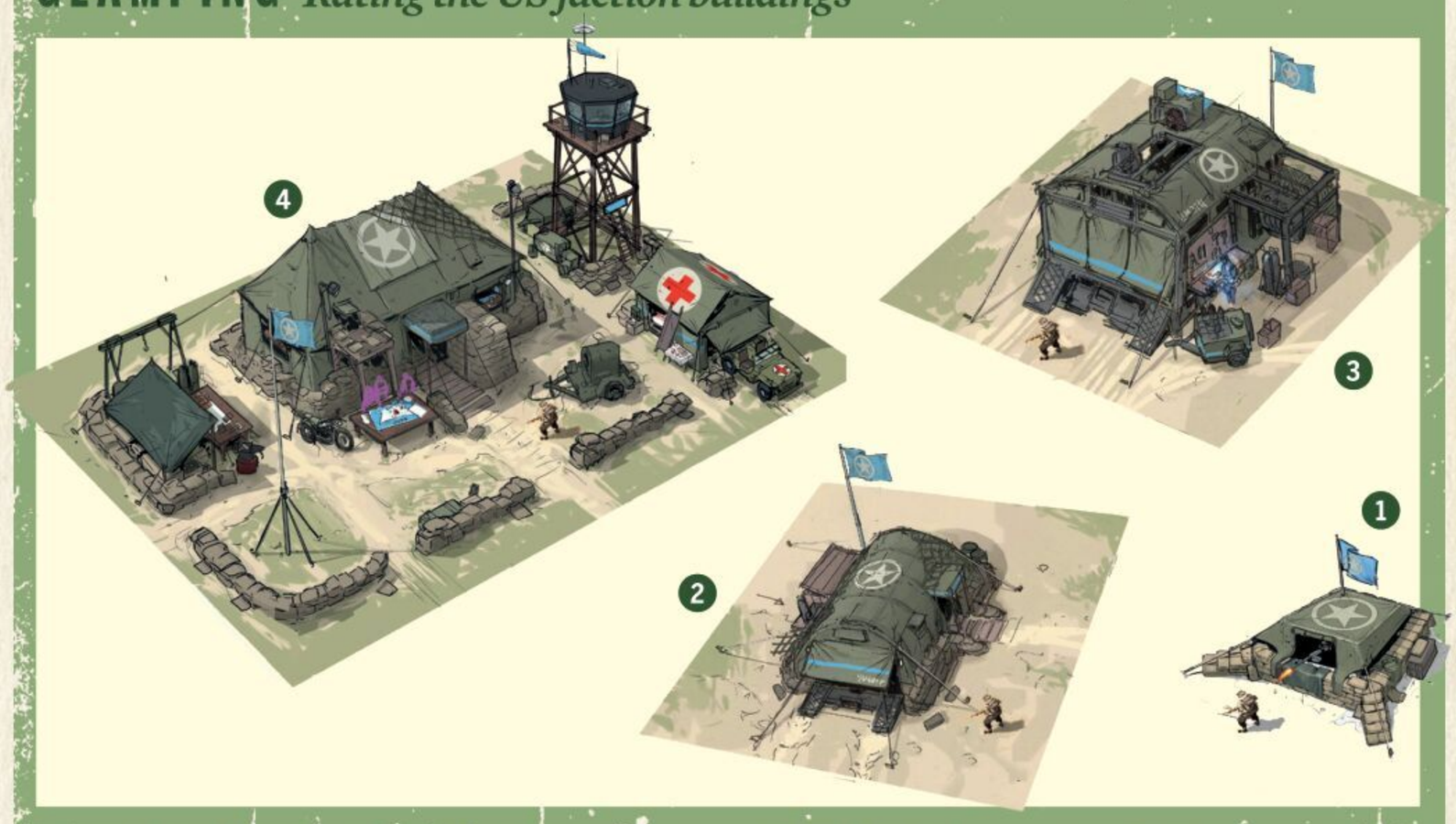
This sneaky company uses elite special forces units, stealth, and advanced weaponry to get the drop on enemies and take them out quickly and efficiently. It's a nice change of pace from *Company of Heroes 3*'s usually explosive battles.

the defensive skirmishes more of a handmade feel, referencing the excellent Carentan Counterattack mission from the first *Company of Heroes*, which gave you ten minutes to build up your defences before the hordes of Germans arrived. And then there are the more unusual modes, like skirmishes where you need to rout and then chase the enemy so nobody can escape.

As I get to work liberating Italy, some chums chime in. I've got a trio of advisors, representing the British, US, and Italian partisan forces. These characters give the war a face, along with another path to unlock more upgrades and abilities, ethical conundrums, and some internal tension. The most interesting among them might be the partisan advisor, who reflects the civilian

ENEMY COMMANDERS HAVE PERSONALITIES THAT INFORM THEIR TACTICS

GLAMPING *Rating the US faction buildings*



1 GUN EMPLACEMENT
Well, this is hardly bigger than a regular two-person tent, and that big gun looks like it takes up a lot of room. 2/10

2 BARRACKS
OK, this is a little better, but you'll also need to share it with a bunch of other sweaty soldiers, some of whom likely snore. 4/10

3 TANK DEPOT
On the upside, you get to share this tent with a tank! On the downside, you have to share this tent with a tank. 5/10

4 HQ
You've got plenty of room for activities, be they work or leisure, and a medical tent in case you fall into nettles. 10/10

ABOVE: It's always stressful when it looks like you'll miss your flight.

contributions to the war, and their toll. When my American bud tells me to bomb Monte Cassino, to make our assault easier, his partisan counterpart warns that there might be civilians hiding in the area we're targeting, advising me to send in partisans first to make sure. Some choices aren't either/or deals, so picking one suggestion doesn't necessarily mean you can't then pick the others, but sometimes you're going to have to ignore someone's advice, which they won't like.

"One of the big themes of the narrative is the rivalry between America and the UK," says lead narrative designer Báirbre Bent. But while you might pick favourites, over the course of the war you can still try to please everyone. "In fact, that's possibly the best way," she adds. And you'll get to know them, too. "One thing we're looking into is a way that you can get a deeper understanding of why these sub commanders want you to do what they've asked you. And we're hoping to bring that in – that there'll be a way for the player to opt in to get a bit more depth and understanding behind each sub commander's vision for the war."

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

The Germans aren't faceless adversaries, either. Enemy commanders have personalities that inform their tactics, and may react differently depending on the situation – a commander on the edge of obliteration with seemingly nothing to lose might become ultra aggressive and make you fight harder for every kill. These aren't things you'll necessarily know straight away, but if you're mates with the partisans, they'll be able to dig up that kind of information.

While I'm painting the campaign map my colour, I get alerted to the presence of a special named opponent and nemesis of the partisans, Taube. This leads to a hunt for the deadly tank commander, which I'm able to speed up by finding key intel. Our first and final meeting takes place in a real-time tank brawl around a small town, culminating in what almost feels like a boss battle, his intimidating Tiger II heavy tank against my considerably more vulnerable troops. I take him out, but the town is dust.

Bent says the narrative team is still exploring ways to add more personality to all sides of the war, and it definitely pays off in the demo. The brutal battle with Taube is a highpoint in this slice of the campaign, and it's that victory that finally makes me feel ready to march to the end, to Monte Cassino.

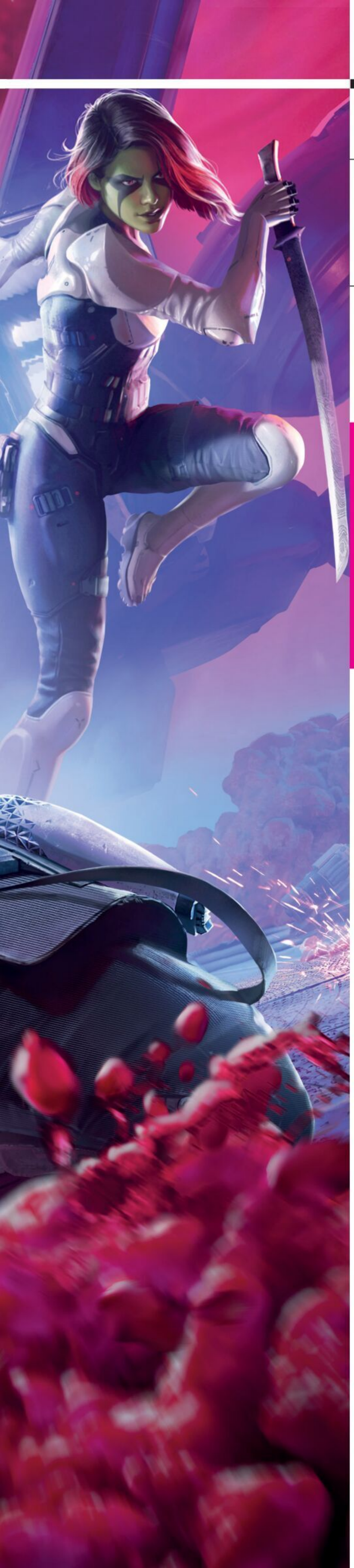
END OF THE LINE

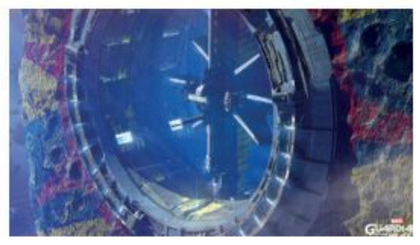
Since I opted not to bomb Monte Cassino, the Germans are well-fortified and waiting for me, but at least they don't have any backup from Taube and his tanks. It's a large map, dominated by a huge hill and one big, winding road, which the enemy forces are obviously keeping a close eye on. Knowing they'll be light on tanks, however, I strike with an armoured company, and it proves to be the right call. The journey up that mountain is slow and painful, and at the top I notice I have absolutely no infantry left. What I do have, however, is five Churchill tanks, and boy do we have some fun. The picturesque setting is turned into craters and rubble, quite a lot of it thanks to me, but I can't feel sad. I've taken Monte Cassino.

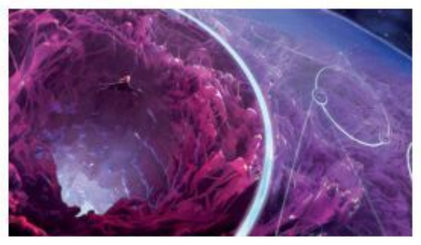
Relic estimates that it should take around four hours to complete the slice I was fighting through. I played for 11. There were some known bugs and performance issues slowing me down towards the end, but I really spent so long in Italy because I didn't want to finish the war. I've been wandering this RTS desert for years, but now there's this oasis, and for a day I got to submerge myself in it. Even in this early state, *Company of Heroes 3* is very impressive, and I just hope it isn't some sort of mirage. And you can check it out for yourself. While it won't be launching until Recently available via the Games2Gether programme. It's no longer live, watch that space!. ■

The road to Monte Cassino looks nice, but it's lethal.

Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
October 26	Eidos Montreal	Square Enix	bit.ly/3qlOmf6

MARVEL'S GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

Banter, '80s bangers, and not a microtransaction in sight

With the Avengers already doing their thing, Square Enix is giving us another superhero group to muck around with, this time from *Deus Ex* studio Eidos Montreal. These heroes are pretty different from Adam Jensen, however, who you'd never see hanging out with a murderous raccoon. Yes, it's the Guardians of the Galaxy.

A roguish band of space adventurers might sound like a good fit for yet another co-op live service affair, like *Marvel's Avengers*, but Eidos Montreal is thankfully sticking to what it knows: a singleplayer game with a narrative bent. It's a linear misadventure that will see you jetting off around the galaxy as Peter Quill, aka Star-Lord.

Senior creative director Jean-François Dugas tells me that playing against expectations was a big "driving force" for the team. Games are increasingly trying to drag us back in with events and season passes and new things to grind, but *Guardians of the Galaxy* isn't looking to swallow up your life. "We weren't looking at trends, to be honest," adds senior gameplay director Patrick Fortier. "When we started sitting down, we were just looking at what do we like to do? What are our strengths with the franchise? How do we give our own unique spin to this?"

Beyond the fact that it's always nice to see a big game that's a traditional singleplayer romp, it also makes a lot more sense for the story that Eidos Montreal is trying to tell. It's all about the Guardians and their relationships, which would be undermined if you had to spend hours every day queueing for missions with xXIAMGROOTXx.

Senior narrative director Mary Demarle says the "narrative experience" is the heart of the game. "We were able to create, I hope, a very compelling story that has a lot of humour, a lot of excitement, a lot of real emotional moments."

IT'S ALWAYS NICE TO SEE A BIG GAME THAT'S A TRADITIONAL SINGLEPLAYER ROMP

FIRST LOOK

LEADING MAN

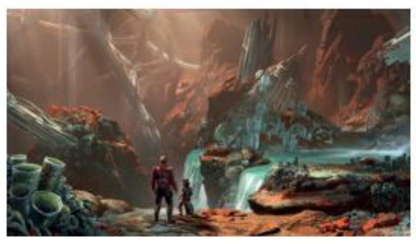
Star-Lord being the sole playable character is a surprise, especially since there isn't a Guardian who wouldn't be fun to play with, but after seeing *Guardians of the Galaxy* in action, I think it's the right choice. The core Guardians are all still here, but like the comics and movies, we experience this galaxy full of aliens through the eyes of the everyman, who serves as the group's kinda-leader.

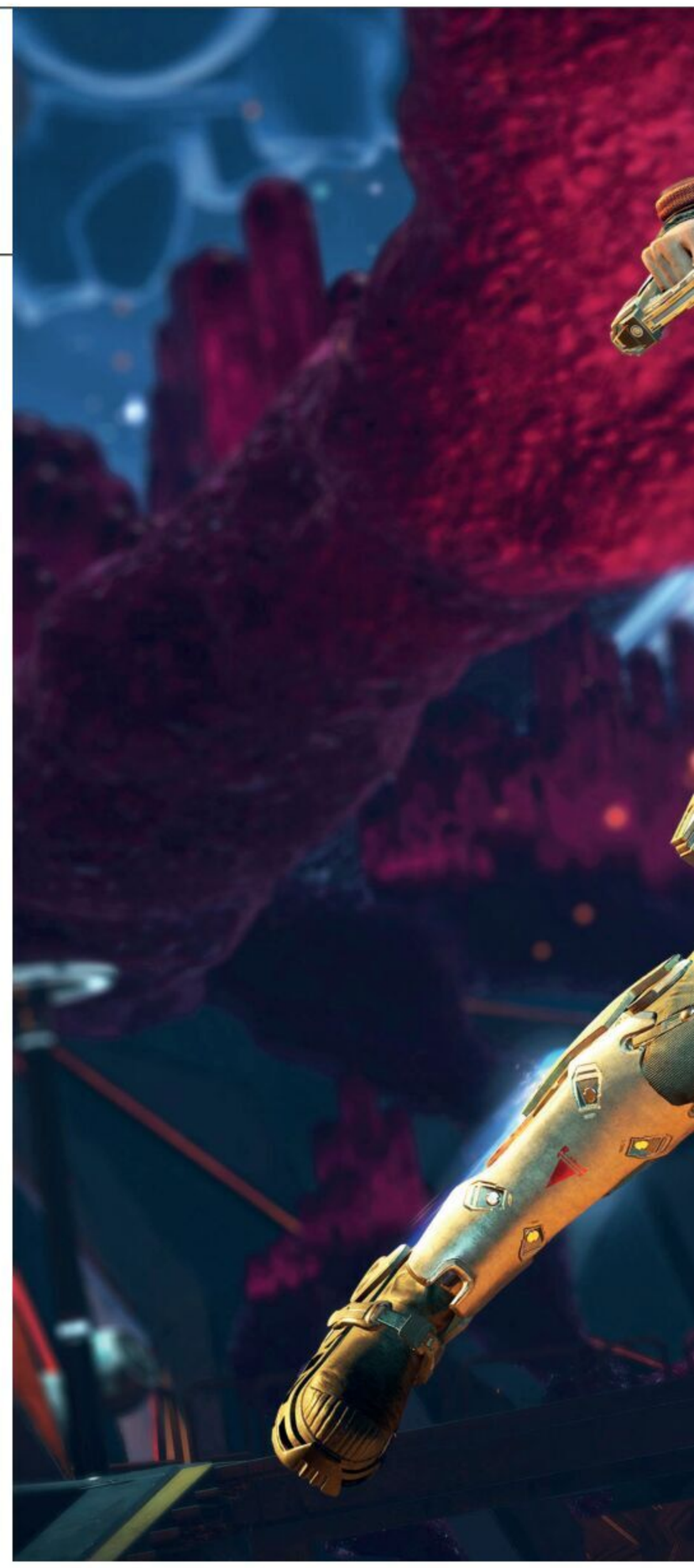
And by making you play only as Star-Lord, says Fortier, Eidos Montreal is able to capture some of the chaos and unpredictability that's key to the Guardians, "Because you don't control everything." Your buds have some agency, then, and the ability to surprise you. In combat, this means that Drax could get a bit carried away because his blood is up, so you might need to go and save him. But since you're the boss, you still have some control, so you can order one of them to use one of their special abilities when you need it.

Eidos Montreal didn't want to bog the action down with lots of commands and micromanagement, but there's still tactical considerations to make during the heat of battle. As well as having all of Star-Lord's handy gadgets, like his elemental guns and jet boots, you can take advantage of each Guardian's powers to create synergies.

"What is also very key is that there's not one way to solve the problem; there's not only one way to battle those enemies," says Dugas. "You can be really experimental, but the systems are built in such a way that you're being rewarded to remain engaged. So the Guardians by themselves will be autonomous and can have some level of success, but if you're straying too far, eventually they can get in

Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy





trouble, and you're the so-called leader – you need to stay engaged with them."

AWESOME MIX

The highlight of the brawls I got to watch was Star-Lord's big team-based ultimate ability. You can tell your pals to huddle up, give an inspiring speech, and then bring out your Walkman, blasting some tunes while you blast some aliens.

Fortier notes that music is a big pillar; it's integral to Star-Lord's backstory. "Peter was ripped from his home at an early age, so even symbolically music represents that last tie to Earth and his past and his childhood, so it's meaningful in that way. And then on the Milano you'll have moments where you can pick the music. And we wanted to find a way to integrate it in-game as well."

The team considered giving you full control over the walkman when you're on-mission, but that seemed too fiddly, especially in a fight. The compromise was to tie it into that specific ability, making for big, dramatic musical moments when the action's at its height.

Star-Lord's obsession with music was a particularly big part of the MCU version of Guardians of the Galaxy, but the game version draws from all sources. It's Eidos Montreal's take on the group, but using characters and story beats fans of the comics and movies will be familiar with. In the case of Star-Lord, the studio really focused on the fact that he's a child of the '80s who never really grew up.

"Once we honed in on that we were able to design the character around that whole feeling of the '80s," says Demarle, "from his overdo, you know, his hairstyle, to his jacket with all the studs, and even the pins that he's wearing on his jacket are all these old '80s games. It really gave us a way to make this Peter Quill recognisable and yet completely our own."

The Guardians certainly look the part – and you'll be able to unlock new costumes for them – and from this brief slice, it certainly seems like the team has managed to get the tone and relationships right as well. The game is set a year into their partnership, so they're not quite veterans, but they've already forged some bonds, even through all the bickering.

IT SEEMS LIKE THE TEAM HAS MANAGED TO GET THE TONE AND RELATIONSHIPS RIGHT

ANGER MANAGEMENT

They wouldn't be the Guardians without some beefs. They disagree, fight, and sometimes screw each other over. Expect lots and lots of reactive banter, which you'll hear even more if you spend a bit more time exploring the levels, but there are also some more meaningful conversations that you'll need to have, where you'll get different choices for how to proceed and, of course, have to manage their consequences.

In one sequence, the group needs to get across a chasm, and Drax suggests throwing Rocket across, as the smallest member of the crew. He's not too happy about that. This allows the group to get across, but Rocket is pretty angry about it.

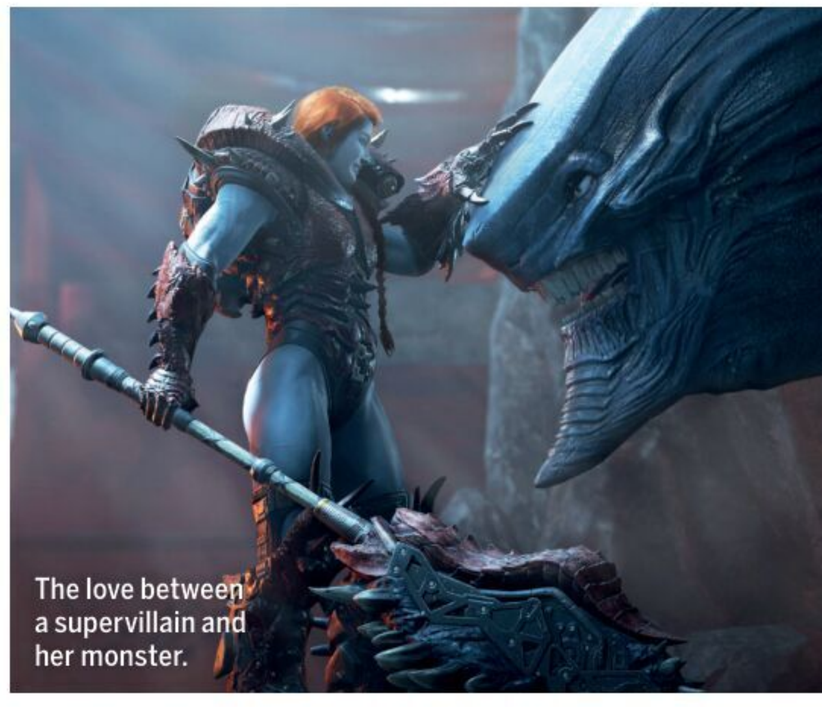
Consequences range from immediate and funny to opening up completely new paths. "We're from Eidos Montreal, so I think it's in our DNA to care about choice and consequences," says Fortier. "And I think it's pretty unique in this particular space, a narrative action adventure, it's not necessarily something that you'd expect." Though we did see some of this in Telltale's *Guardians of the Galaxy*, this is a very different kind of game, and the addition of these choices and relationships does seem pretty novel.

While some of the consequences look substantial, the main story will still be broadly the same for everyone (at least in regards to how it starts and ends) but through your choices you'll get a different version of it. What the actual story is remains mysterious. We know the Guardians want to make a buck out of the charmingly named Lady Hellbender, who wants a big alien monster, but of course everything goes wrong and the heroes end up unleashing something unpleasant. Beyond that, the devs are staying schtum.

Thankfully, we won't have to wait very long to find out more. *Guardians of the Galaxy* is due on October 26, so it's just around the corner. Eidos Montreal has been working on it with Marvel for a few years, so it's managed to keep it secret for a while, even if rumours did appear recently. And when you get your hands on the game, you get it all.

"There isn't going to be any DLC for this game," says Demarle, "there isn't going to be any microtransactions, and that's because, for us, it's very important that on day one, when players get this game, they can have access to everything." After *Marvel's Avengers*, that is definitely a relief.

Fraser Brown



The love between a supervillain and her monster.

ABOVE: Quill has guns that shoot different elemental effects, like in the comics.

LEFT: Old craterface here probably just wants to talk.

Dying Light 2: Stay Human

LIGHTS OUT

In the open-world post-apocalypse of DYING LIGHT 2: STAY HUMAN, the choices you make can change an entire city.

By Andy Kelly

Aiden Caldwell, enigmatic hero of *Dying Light 2: Stay Human*, is a member of the Pilgrims – a loose gathering of post-apocalyptic drifters wandering the ruins of the old world. He arrives in the City, the nameless metropolis where the game is set, looking for his sister, Mia. "Aiden is plagued by vague, disconnected memories of her," says lead game designer Tymon Smektała. "When he learns the people responsible for what happened to her have been found there, he embarks on a mission to learn the truth."

This open-world zombie game is going a step beyond the original, backing its free-running, undead swarms, and brutal melee combat up with an interactive, branching story you can have a real impact on. The City isn't just home to countless numbers of aggressive infected, but warring factions of human survivors too. It's a big old mess, but a compelling setting for a survival horror game. And one of the most interesting features in *Dying Light 2* is how the City changes dramatically depending on the time of day.

NIGHT UNLIFE

When night falls, the streets are overrun with infected. The safe option is to stay on the rooftops and wait for the sun to send them scurrying back into their lairs. But if you're feeling brave, venturing down into the depths of the city can net you some quality loot. Building interiors that are usually teeming with zombies are suddenly empty, with only a few stragglers remaining, letting you sneak in to grab gear and upgrades. Then you just have to worry about making it out and back to the relative safety of the rooftops.

"The City transforms at night," says Smektała. "Citizens hide away in their hiding places, the glow of UV lamps is visible everywhere, and the silence of the night is interrupted by the sound of monsters crawling out into the streets. A world full of dangers by day becomes a whole different challenge at night. The lairs of the infected become empty, giving you the opportunity to explore and find useful and sometimes very valuable items."

Techland describes *Dying Light 2*'s setting as a 'modern dark age.' While most zombie games are set in the immediate aftermath of an outbreak, or long after it, this story takes place just as the world has gotten over the initial shock and is starting to rebuild. "Fifteen years have passed since the global apocalypse that followed the virus emerging, and we've tried to make the City reflect this in a realistic and credible way," says Smektała. "We looked for inspiration in the cities where we live. We let our imaginations run wild and thought about what would change if such a major catastrophe occurred.

"We imagined what parts of the city would stay human, and which parts would be reclaimed by nature. What kind of living spaces would be created by people, and what structures would be formed during these 15 years by the hands of people who cut off from technology. This is how our modern dark age was created – a civilisation that returned to medieval times in the modern day, and with the memory of the world before the fall."

ALL CHANGE

Interestingly, the City isn't a totally fixed, static environment. Parts of it can change based on the many decisions you make over the course of the game. Meaningful player choice is something the developer is striving for – including making you feel bad as the consequences of your actions play out in front of you. As you progress through the story you'll

TECHLAND DESCRIBES DYING LIGHT 2'S SETTING AS A 'MODERN DARK AGE'

As with any good zombie apocalypse, humans can be just as monstrous as the monsters themselves.

affect the lives of people in small, individual ways, but also change the layout of the City itself.

"Your decisions can shape the appearance of locations and affect the factions living in the City, and you will see the outcome of this impact on the environment," says Smektała. "It's worth going through the game more than once, or in co-op, to discover everything that is impacted by these choices. There are interesting sidequests that will have their own consequences," he adds. "Some choices you may even regret when your actions inadvertently make the lives of other residents of the City difficult."

Getting around the City is made easier by the fact that Aiden is a skilled free-runner. The parkour system in *Dying Light 2* is much more complex and natural-feeling than in the previous game, and you'll have access to way more moves.

"Parkour is the essence of *Dying Light*," says Smektała. "It is our beloved child who makes us proud. Bartosz Kulon [programmer and designer] came to Adrian 'Pyza' Ciszewski [director] many years ago and said, 'Yeah, *Dead Island* is great, but what if we added roof-running and climbing?' And that was where the idea for *Dying Light* was born.

"There are thousands of animations based on, among others, the movements of the legendary father of this discipline, David Belle. We have crazy parkour combinations that allow you to do really wild acrobatics and tools that allow us to diversify limited human movements with new possibilities. In addition, there is a refreshed grappling hook and paraglider system, which increase the importance of gravity and natural movement in the game. It had to be immersive and satisfying since the player's main way of moving around the City would be on foot."

David Belle is a French actor, choreographer, and stunt coordinator, and the founder and leading pioneer

I SCREAM

How the Howler was created

"When designing the Howler, we tried to emphasise its main function in the world, which is screaming," says Katarzyna Bech, lead character concept artist. "It has a painful growth, a mutation, on the chest and lungs, as well as on the larynx, which suggests where this incredible and terrifying sound comes from. It can even paralyse the player for a moment. The Howler is also aided in its screams by a wide-open, four-part maw. This creature is not physically strong, so its body shows it through its emaciation, protruding bones, hanging pale skin, and mutated atrophic hand."

You aren't the only character in this world with sick parkour skills.

Dying Light 2: Stay Huma

In a world where firearms are almost non-existent, a bow and arrow comes in very handy indeed.

of parkour – so having him in a game where parkour is a key feature is a pretty big deal. "David is an important part of the game," says Smektała. "Starting with him playing the character of Hakon, to the extra realism his mocap session gave us, including many new animations. And of course, he's been the 'father of parkour' for many years, and from the first game he's been both an inspiration and our guide to authentic parkour techniques and the amazing movements the body can make. We couldn't imagine creating *Dying Light* 2 without David Belle."

OLD YELLER

You'll need to master Aiden's parkour skills to outsmart *Dying Light 2*'s wider range of zombies, especially when you encounter the Howler. "At first, the Howler was a stationary enemy, almost like a CCTV camera, just scouting the area," says Smektała. "But, as we were working on the game, we started developing our stealth mechanics a little bit more. "The Howler naturally became a primary obstacle in all situations

DEAD SET *A history of Techland zombie games*

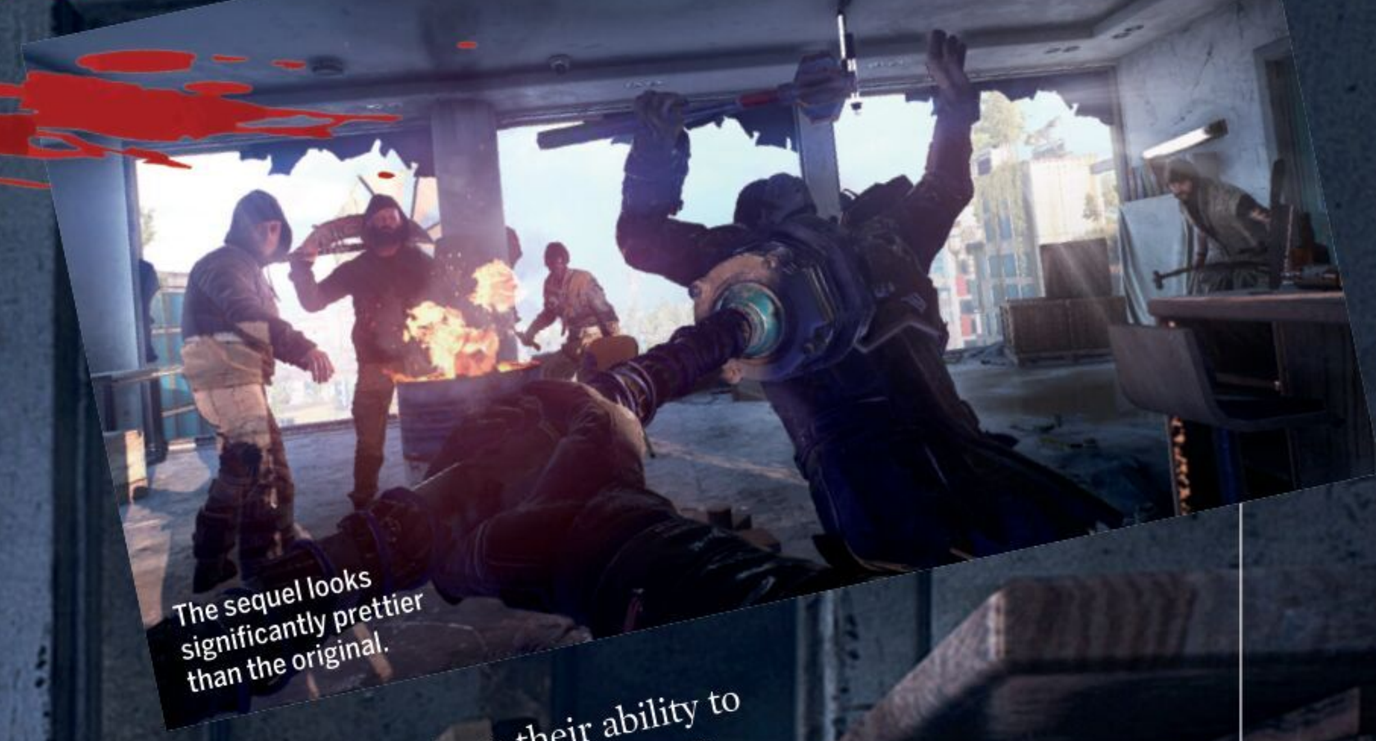
DEAD ISLAND
2011
Zombies infest the fictional tropical island of Banoi, and four survivors are forced into a battle to escape a luxury holiday resort.

DEAD ISLAND: RIPTIDE
2013
Another island in the Banoi archipelago suffers its own zombie invasion, and another team of survivors steps up to fight them.

DYING LIGHT
2015
A fictional Middle-Eastern city called Harran is overrun by zombies, and an undercover agent is sent to infiltrate the quarantine zone.

DYING LIGHT: THE FOLLOWING
2016
In this major expansion for *Dying Light*, the first game's hero returns to investigate a potential cure for the virus.

"THE HOWLER NATURALLY BECAME A PRIMARY OBSTACLE IN ALL SITUATIONS INVOLVING STEALTH"



The sequel looks significantly prettier than the original.

involving stealth. The archetype for the enemy stayed with us since the initial inception – it was supposed to be a sentry that could spot the player and alarm other units around. But during development, we realised we could do a lot more with it, like having it patrol the area. Howlers don't actually engage on sight. Instead, they emit a high-pitched scream which will attract any infected in the area and lure them towards your position."

I ask Smektała about the balance of story and action in *Dying Light 2*. Storytelling is something the team is clearly putting an increased focus on, but to what extent? "*Dying Light 2* is an action game," he says. "We have parkour as a way to move around the world freely, rewarding combat, a variety of weapons and even parkour moves that you can use creatively while fighting. The animation base is huge, which allows players to overcome the many dangers in the City in a spectacular manner.

"However, it was very important for us to create an interesting and engaging story as well. People in the world will react to the player's actions and choices, and they can become friends or enemies depending on your decisions. There's also a new system called city alignment, where you can assign specific zones of the city to one of the factions, which of course may also influence the world and the story in interesting ways."

There are three main factions in *Dying Light 2*. The Peacekeepers are dedicated to eliminating all threats to humanity in the world. "They want to rally citizens to their views and secure territory for a new society based on their principles," says Smektała. "On the other hand, the Survivors believe that their survival depends on their ability to foster craftsmanship and relearn ancient skills to thrive. They value experimentation, art, culture, and knowledge, and passing this down to their children."

Then, lastly, there are the Renegades. "They believe in sacrifice for the greater good," says Smektała. "They're a ruthless, militarised criminal organisation, resorting to immoral means to ensure their survival." When you play *Dying Light 2* you'll be able to work for these three factions – but working for one that is the enemy of another won't go unnoticed.

And what about that *Stay Human* subtitle in the game name? I ask Smektała what it represents. "As you can imagine, in an apocalypse, society becomes brutal and all its elements are reevaluated. The title covers two issues, physical and mental. On the physical side, this is of course avoiding transformation due to infection: controlling the disease through biomarkers and taking care of exposure to UV rays. In short, 'stay human' as a living being and prevent yourself from turning into a monster.

"The second layer, humanity, is about remaining human according to the norms and principles we know. The world after the apocalypse has changed in almost every respect, and it will be up to the player whether they will be guided by the good of the individual, the greater good, or maybe take a different path altogether."

You can decide what path *you'll* take when *Dying Light 2: Stay Human* is released on December 7. ■

Harold Halibut

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Slow Bros	In-house	slow-bros.com/harold-halibut

HAROLD HALIBUT

A beautiful stop-motion game ten years in the making

If you were to fling the last humans to a distant planet and raise them on a spaceship for 250 years, you'd end up with some weirdos. *Harold Halibut* is about just such a group, and turns out that humanity's last hopes are indeed a quirky bunch.

Mr Halibut himself is one such resident of this city. He's the ship's handyman and lab assistant to lead scientist, Jeanne Mareaux, who is trying to find a way to get humanity's metropolis unstuck and back into space. Turns out after leaving Earth the space vessel's residents hoped they would find another planet, but accidentally crash-landed, leaving everyone trapped underneath the waves of an alien world. Not that they seem to care much – many of the inhabitants have found peace with their underwater life.

It's a sci-fi adventure that developer Slow Bros says tackles the topics of love, family, grief, and relationships. But *Harold Halibut*'s main attraction is that the game looks gorgeous. Its story is told completely through stop-motion visuals, and the graphics have taken the team a long time to perfect.

"Almost ten years," Slow Bros' game director Onat Hekimoglu says. "Counting initial idea gathering, years of experimental technology development next to school and other jobs, setting up a company and a lot more. We're excited to provide a really dense worldbuilding setup that lets your curiosity guide you."

THERE'S BUDDY THE POSTMAN WHO HAS BEEFY CALVES AND RUNS EVERYWHERE

RAPTUROUS

That's exactly what I do as I play through the game's first chapter. The preview is light on story and instead lets you explore the submerged city. It's incredible knowing that everything has been physically made. The delicate facial features of the character models, every handcrafted item on the general store's shelf, the wooden floorboards, rusty pipes, knitted jumpers – there are hundreds of tiny details.

"Fabian Preuschoff, the set architect, would build the set at a 1:10 scale from materials ranging from children's clay to welded metal or aged wood," Hekimoglu says. "Then it would be painted, 'aged' via chemicals that create rust and other patinas, then add the details like dirt/dust smeared on the wall."

If you look carefully, you can see the painterly brush strokes on faded posters and store signs, and even the tiles on the arcade floor look like someone has cut out hundreds of tiny vinyl squares. One character wears a tiny, well-worn knitted jumper with a smiley face sewn in.

PLAYED IT

Exploring the ship, you get introduced to many of its inhabitants. There's Buddy the postman who has beefy calves and runs everywhere, insisting he keeps his promise of same-day delivery. The general store owner, Tommy, believes that his wife has lost interest in him and so in an attempt to win her back, builds a neon sign above his store declaring his love for her. My favourite is the shop owner of a clothing store whose sheer excitement for selling winter wear on a spaceship with zero climate is remarkable.

"The people living on this ship are supposed to represent a cross-section of what it might be like to isolate a human population for a long time," Hekimoglu says. "We tried to balance Earthly contemporary conventions and an amplified 'game of telephone' version of conventions from the past." I love the idea that the last of humanity ended up getting everything not quite right.

Harold Halibut's Steam page says it's "coming soon" although I'm pretty sure Slow Bros has kept it that way for the past several years. Let's hope that we'll get to play it sooner rather than later.

Rachel Watts

A corporation named All Water Corp controls the ship.

Harold Halibut

ABOVE: There are ten Mr Secretarys, all brothers, all identical.

LEFT: The spaceship's control base is the most impressive set.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2021	Kathawk Studios	Hooded Horse	bit.ly/3flUhSL

ALLIANCE OF THE SACRED SUNS

Dune meets *Crusader Kings* in this ambitious strategy game

Emperor Gary Spacetimes is in a heap of trouble. Not only has he inherited the Imperial Space Throne at the tender age of 18, but soothsayers across the galaxy are predicting civilisational collapse within the next 20 years, as resources grow scarce and planetary populations reach breaking point. Gary's only hope is to reunite the six great houses.

Such is the premise of *Alliance of the Sacred Suns*, which is what you'd get if you crossed the novel Dune with *Crusader Kings* and then beat the resulting hybrid to death with a kaleidoscope. It's a game with grand ambitions, but a few of its design decisions left me a little concerned for the final product.

While *Crusader Kings* is the most obvious comparison point for *Alliance*, there are a few major differences between the two games. For starters, *Alliance* is turn-based rather than real-time, which means the game has a very different flow compared to Paradox Interactive's grand strategy. More importantly, there's no dynastic element to *Alliance* and no choices regarding the role you play in its universe.

A game of *Alliance* starts off with you creating said Emperor. You give them a name, choose a portrait to represent them, and assign a House tradition, which determines your prowess in areas such as farming, academia, and energy production. The game then proceeds to an overhead view of a galaxy map, split into several constellations somewhat confusingly known as provinces. Each province comprises multiple star systems, which in turn contain various planets ranging from lifeless ice-balls all the way up to resource-abundant Super Earths.

IT TAUGHT ME THE FIRST RULE OF RUNNING AN EMPIRE: LEARN WHO TO IGNORE

PLAYED IT

SUN WORSHIPPERS

Initially, you'll only control one or two planets directly – known as your holdings. While you can acquire more, and it can be prudent to do so, that isn't really the point of *Alliance*. Your objective is the integrity of the Empire as a whole, achieving which requires a more nuanced approach than making land grabs for personal gain.

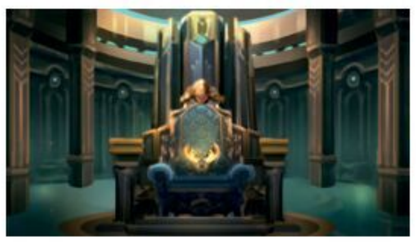
Successfully managing and expanding your empire involves a delicate mixture of diplomacy, intrigue, economics, and military might. Moreover, you must take care in what you choose to prioritise. You only receive a handful of action points per turn, and it's frighteningly easy to burn through them. On the second turn of Gary Spacetimes' reign, I was bombarded with calls for attention by various figures throughout the empire. I naively tried to heed all these calls, not realising that simply reading some of these notes costs an action point. By the time I'd finished, I'd burned through all my AP, leaving me unable to enact any of my plans for the turn.

Although this was annoying, it taught me the first rule of running an Empire: learn who to ignore. There will always be more problems than you can effectively deal with, so you need to focus on what needs to be done, what can be most realistically achieved, and what will best benefit both you and the Empire.

To that end, one of your most important goals is surveying the political landscape between you and the other Great Houses. Your relationships with the various houses don't start off equal. Some will be friendly or indifferent toward you, while others will have vendettas or may have even sworn vengeance against you.

The reasons for behind these vendettas are not made clear by *Alliance*, which is a shame, but it also doesn't matter. The point is they don't like you, which will affect your approach to uniting them. Friendlier houses can be brought into the fold with compliments, support for their projects, and the occasional bribe. These House Heads can then be

Alliance of the Sacred Suns



stuffed into the Galactic Council, where they can influence votes on issues such as whether to cap domestic spending, or whether to curtail the Emperor's power.

HOUSE PARTY

Like *Crusader Kings*, *Alliance* has an entire system dedicated to subterfuge, which revolves around characters known as Inquisitors. These spies can be dispatched into rival houses to covertly monitor their activity or perform heavier handed actions such as assassinations. Alternatively, Inquisitors can be used to unravel the plots and schemes of other houses, the information from which can be used to have conspirators arrested, thereby removing them from the power structure.

But the most effective way to influence houses of all stripes is simply giving them things to do. Expanding the Empire is achieved through Projects, which include scouting new systems, colonising planets, and building new infrastructure like trading hubs. Each Project is overseen by a project leader of your choosing, and is supported by three Contributors who excel in a relevant field of expertise. Completing Projects increases the Power of both the Emperor and those who partook in its completion. Consequently, all Houses want to be selected to do the Empire's good work, and will be more amenable to you if they're included.

I like this side of *Alliance*, the way it attempts to simulate the burden of duty that comes with power, all the wearisome games you have to play to massage bruised egos and channel the ambition of rivals so that it's useful without being a threat. Alongside the more dynamic political wrangling, most turns commence with a bespoke, *Crusader Kings*-style event that helps define your leader's character. It could be as simple as imagining what kind of leader you'd like to be, or it could be more specific, such as how to respond to a colony that has suddenly cut off all communication.

REBEL ALLIANCE

At times, *Alliance* made me feel like Duke Leto Atreides, shouldered with a responsibility that I didn't want, forced to deal amicably with people who quite clearly want me dead. But *Alliance* also made me feel like Leto Atreides in another way, that the game itself was actively conspiring against me, being wilfully obtuse and withholding information for reasons beyond my comprehension.

I simply could not figure out, for example, how I was supposed to effectively manage my economy. I understood the broad goal, which is to increase your Gross Empire Product (GEP) to support your annual budget. The actual mechanics of increasing your GEP, however, were completely beyond me.

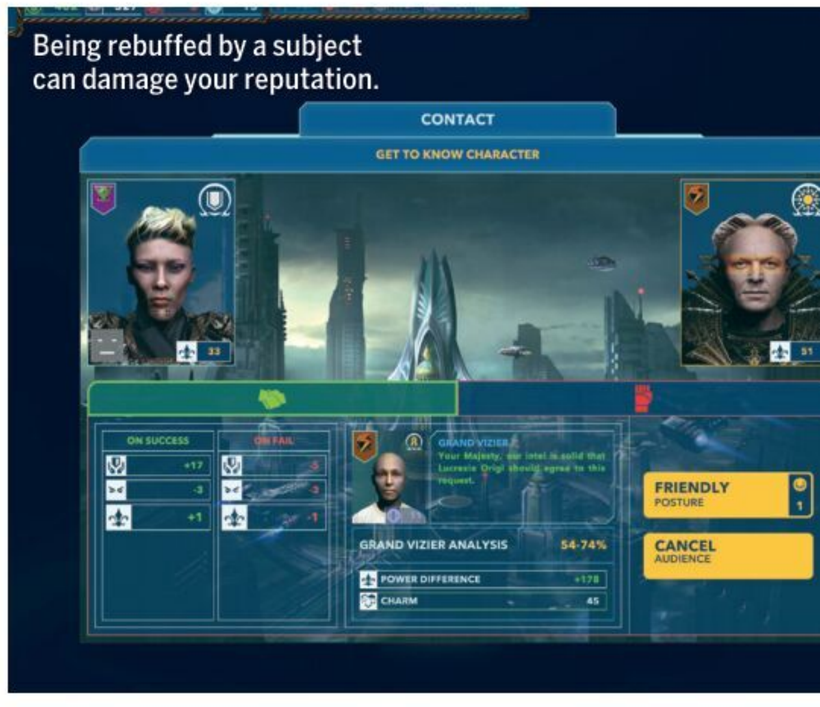
It's entirely possible that this is my fault, and that I simply overlooked an important button or tooltip. But *Alliance*'s UI design is not much help in this regard. It's worth noting *Alliance* isn't the prettiest looking grand strategy around. The planets look nice, but the character portraits are stunningly ugly. The biggest eyesore, however is the UI, an assault of clashing colours and wildly varying font sizes that makes it extremely hard to parse the information it displays.

Moreover, the demo build of *Alliance* would generously be described as roughshod. The UI is littered with placeholder text. Many buttons simply don't work, such as the Exploit button on planets. There's a noticeable stutter whenever you switch between galaxy layers or UI screens, which makes the whole experience feel rather sticky. Oh, and the save system doesn't seem to work either, which meant I had to keep the game running or risk losing all my progress. Bit of a nightmare.

Again, let me stress that it's only a demo of a beta build, and not necessarily representative of the final product. Nonetheless, I'm concerned that *Alliance* risks suffering from a lack of focus. The concept of placing you in the role of a specific ruler at a time of crisis is an interesting one, and I like the way *Alliance* tries to simulate the distance between you as Emperor and your subjects. But I'm not sure how well this stacks with becoming mired in the construction of individual trading hubs for individual planets, or having three different types of scouting mission when exploring new worlds. I understand that grand strategy games tend toward the complex. But complexity does not equate to greatness, and I fear that *Alliance of the Sacred Suns* may be undone by sweating the unnecessary details that Gary Spacetimes so quickly learned to avoid.

Rick Lane

THE DEMO BUILD OF ALLIANCE WOULD GENEROUSLY BE DESCRIBED AS ROUGHSHOD



ABOVE: How would you like your planet scanned? Rare, medium, or well-done?

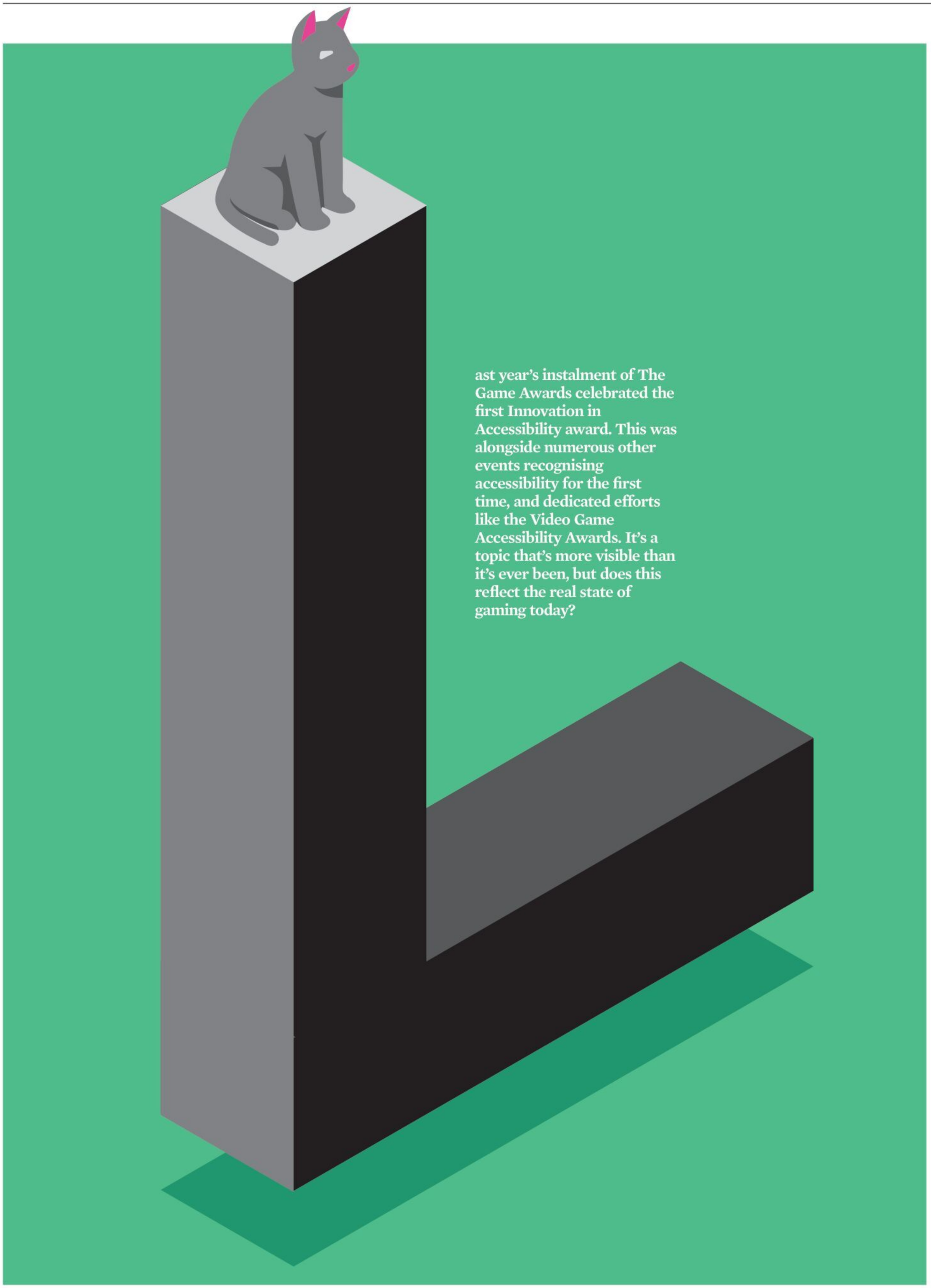
LEFT: The depth of *Alliance* can be quite intimidating.

WE ALL PLAY GAMES

From indies to blockbusters, developers are striving to include disabled players now more than ever

By Ruth Cassidy

Accessibility in games



ast year's instalment of The Game Awards celebrated the first Innovation in Accessibility award. This was alongside numerous other events recognising accessibility for the first time, and dedicated efforts like the Video Game Accessibility Awards. It's a topic that's more visible than it's ever been, but does this reflect the real state of gaming today?

While we might talk about some games as being 'accessible to new players' or an 'accessible entry point to a niche genre', accessibility here means access for disabled people – who make up 20% of working age adults in Australia, and 10.4% in the US. So while mainstream games awards may have their flaws – rewarding some of the industry's darker aspects like crunch and abusive management – it's still meaningful when they recognise efforts to remove the barriers that might exclude us.

Accessibility doesn't only make things better for disabled players, however. David Tisserand, Ubisoft's senior accessibility manager, shared on Twitter that around 95% of players leave

"FOR US, ACCESSIBILITY IS ABOUT REMOVING UNINTENTIONAL BARRIERS"

subtitles on when it's the default setting, and around 75% turn them on in the options at least once. This is a significantly higher percentage of the population than those who have hearing loss. Over email, Tisserand says, "For us, accessibility is about removing unintentional barriers so that as many players as possible can enjoy our games." And concerning subtitles, that includes people with difficulty processing audio, noisy roommates, babies they can't wake up, crunchy Doritos – the list goes on.

SPIDER SLIDER

Ubisoft took two nominations for Innovation in Accessibility with *Watch Dogs: Legion* and *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, but another nominee was Obsidian's Early Access survival game, *Grounded*. It sees players shrunk down to bite-size teen adventurers – an unnerving experience if the thing threatening to bite you is a spider. *Grounded*'s Arachnophobia Safe Mode made news last year for being the first game of its kind to buck the trend of forcing spiders on players with a phobia of them, allowing you to remove disturbing elements of their design or, at the top level, turn them into cute blobs.

TOP: *Grounded*'s least spider-y spider removes all legs and furry textures.

ABOVE: *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* full key rebinding was praised by the first Video Games Accessibility Awards.

Grounded also highlights the way that accessibility can be enhanced in even its more basic structures, like its 'talk to me' feature: a text-to-speech setting for its UI. As senior programmer Brian Macintosh explained, it wasn't initially his idea, but something publisher Xbox Game Studios encouraged. "I didn't initially understand how someone who is blind could even play *Grounded*, but it turns out there are many people who can see well enough to navigate the game but have trouble reading text for vision or even cognitive reasons. For them, this feature takes the game from 'barely playable' to 'quite playable' which is a huge win."

Without downplaying the seriousness of phobias, most of us can relate to finding spiders unsettling – I used the slider myself when it turned out my tolerance for the critters strongly depended on our relative size being biased in my favour. While this approach is inarguably

NOT JUST AAA-CCESSIBLE

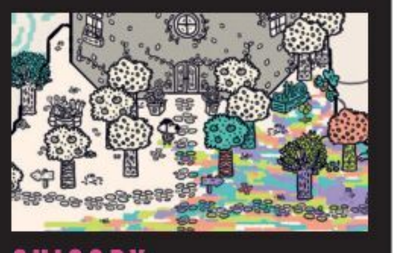
Indies are leading the charge of accessibility

HADES

Hades' introduction of God Mode was well-loved, ensuring disabled players didn't hit a wall in the roguelike with its incremental increase of Zagreus' demigod defences.

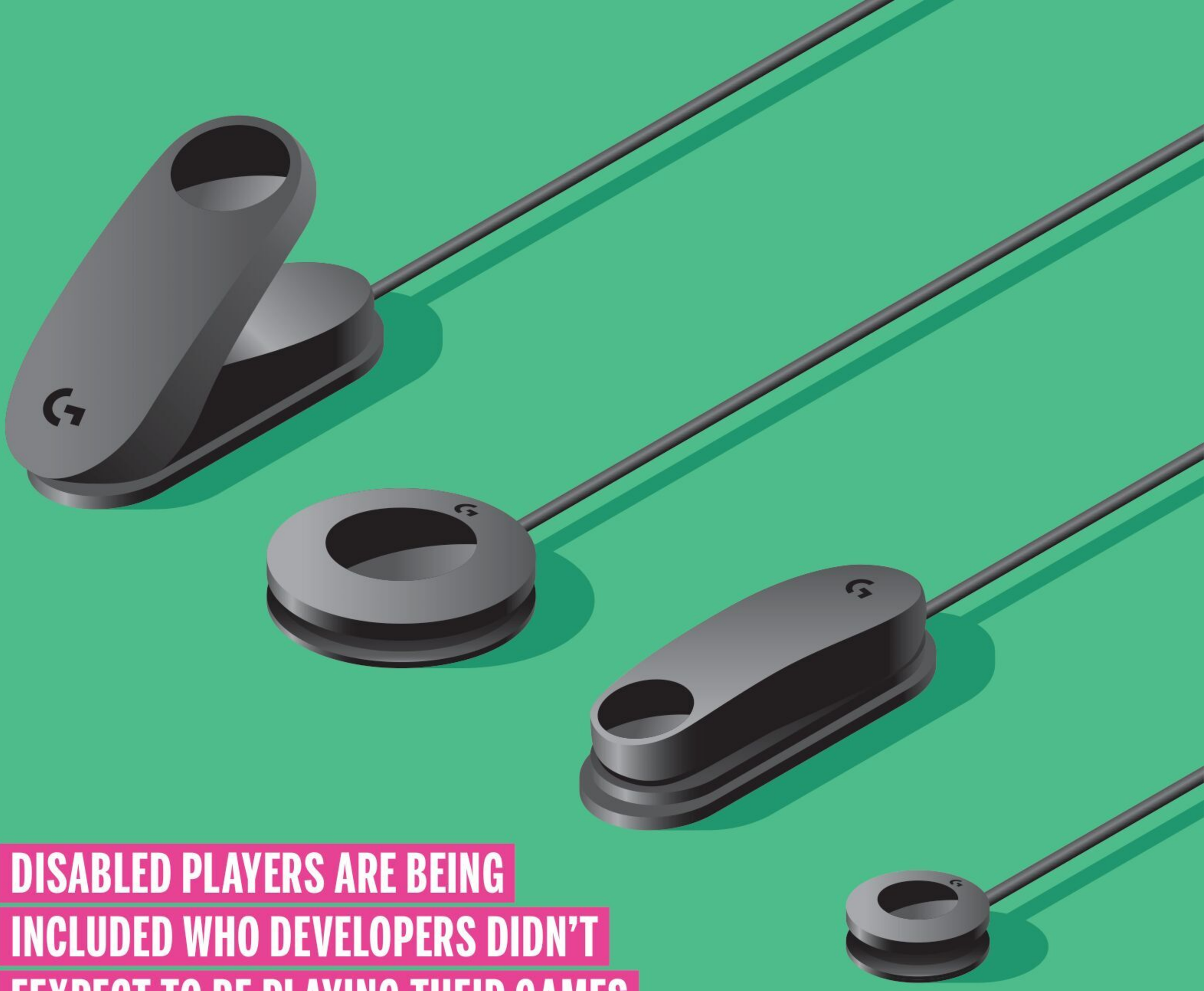
PARADISE KILLER

Detective game *Paradise Killer* is stylish, but not murderous on the eyes – letting players disable the psychedelic backgrounds that could cause vertigo or motion sickness.



CHICORY: A COLORFUL TALE

Chicory is a notably colourblind accessible painting game – and it also allows players to disable 'wet sounds', which can be bad for players with misophonia.



DISABLED PLAYERS ARE BEING INCLUDED WHO DEVELOPERS DIDN'T EEXPECT TO BE PLAYING THEIR GAMES

innovative, *Grounded*'s text-to-speech option being a first for Obsidian represents something no less notable. Disabled players are being included who developers didn't even expect to be playing their games.

WATCH THIS

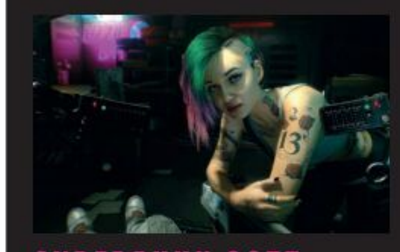
Beside industry giants Obsidian and Ubisoft, an unexpected nominee for Innovation in Accessibility was indie creation *HyperDot*. The game features only one mechanic: to move, or more precisely, to dodge out of the way of the polygons flinging themselves at you at high speed. *HyperDot*'s design was always centred around flexible approaches, but creator Charles McGregor credits a friend of his being gifted a Tobii Eye Tracker with the moment he realised he could make the game far more accessible.

"After I got [eye tracker compatibility] in there I was like, 'Oh, if you can't hold a controller, if you have a motor disability, you would be able to actually play all of *HyperDot* with it,' and that really was the start of, 'Oh yeah, I'm going to actually take this a little bit more seriously and look into this.'" From there, his publisher Glitch supported him to reach out to accessibility consultant Cherry Thompson, as well as seek feedback from disabled streamers.

Watching streamers play the game was the first time McGregor had seen the game played outside of the build on his own computer. "Anytime that somebody couldn't play the game, whether it be a physical disability, or whether it be the game was just too challenging or something like that, that was just a gut punch, like, 'Oh man I don't want you to not be able to play the game.' I think that that was a huge motivator for me." As a result,

WIN SOME, LOSE SOME

Accessibility is improving – but for some it's hit-and-miss



CYBERPUNK 2077

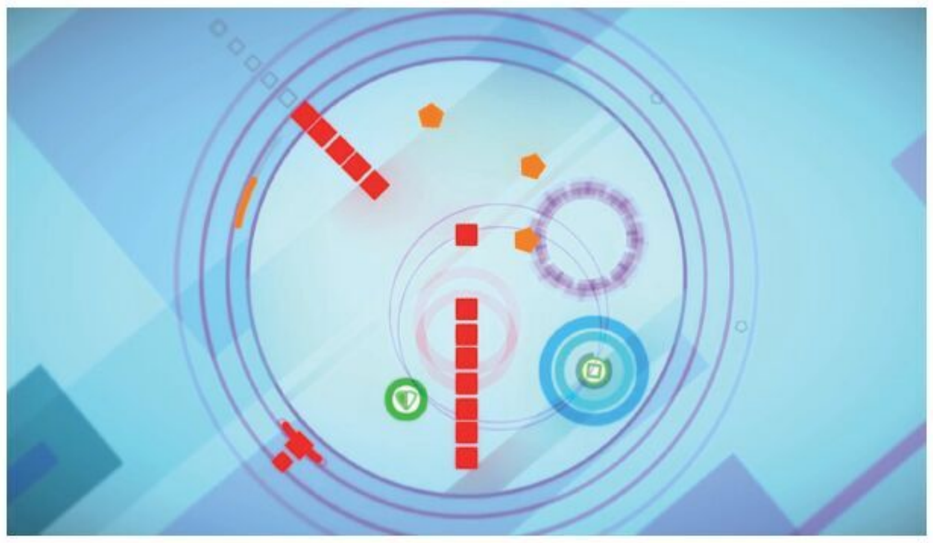
Last year's *Cyberpunk 2077* needed a rapid hotfix after journalist Liana Ruppert discovered multiple seizure triggers in the game, including mandatory braindance sequences.

RESIDENT EVIL: VILLAGE

Capcom's latest entry in its iconic horror series neglected to caption its sound effects, leaving the game more stark than spooky for deaf players.

ASSASSIN'S CREED: VALHALLA

Accessibility failures and successes can come from the same game, such as *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, which doesn't subtitle Eivor's frequent self talk.



HyperDot offers support for seven unique controllers – including tilt and touch, as well as eye tracking.

TOP: *HyperDot* is partly so accessible because it has only one player action: move.

BELOW: The Xbox Adaptive controller is one of the more flexible options for alternative controllers.

MORE THAN LEDS

Support for alternative input is important because PC gaming is not, out of the box, accessible for everybody. Regardless of the content of any game, a mouse and keyboard can itself be a barrier. Alternative methods of input aren't a solution to inaccessible game design – but at the same time, even the best designed game is inaccessible if you can't use a PC. But, with PC gaming you can play with whatever peripherals you prefer, whether it's a glowing rainbow mouse or no mouse at all.

Charity AbleGamers helps connect disabled players with the technology they may need to play. Their objective, as stated on their website: "Our mission is to enable play, in order to combat social isolation, foster inclusive communities, to improve the lives of people with disabilities." Disabled players can request support, and access individual peer counselling to help assess what they might need to adapt, with AbleGamers then also providing that equipment for those in financial need. The site also hosts a self-help library that breaks down what technology is available for impairments such as gaming with one hand, or a visual impairment.

Technology solutions vary from specialist controllers (like the GrizPaw, which advertises being the fastest one-handed controller), to customising the Xbox Adaptive Controller with the best switches for your needs. As described by the AbleGamers site, "You can find switches for a variety of situations including, light touch, rigid, and even ones called 'twitch switches,' which can be placed on a muscle such as your calf or eyebrows."

There are also players for whom alternative forms of input don't make PC gaming more accessible at all, as it's the required posture that is the issue. "Because of POTS, sitting upright for long periods like you normally would in a desk chair can make me dizzy and tired," explains Els White, director of Spider Lily Studios, who keeps his chair reclined fully back, and has his monitor attached to an adjustable arm to tilt it in-line with his face. From this setup, he both plays games and works on his own. "My keyboard goes on a raised lap rest, and my mouse on a table beside me. Much easier on my heart!"

PAINFUL PLAY

Accessibility isn't a one-size-fits-all solution, as not all disabled people have the same needs. For some, there aren't adjustments they can make – PC gaming is simply less accessible than the alternatives. "I tend to avoid PC games because after working all day at my computer, sitting there for even longer causes significant back and joint pain," says Courtney Craven, editor in chief of accessibility review site 'Can I Play That?'. They've also tried playing PC games with a controller instead of a mouse, "But that always seems to result in poor posture and again, more pain."

Issues like pain and other sensory and motor impairments are often the first thing we think of in terms of accessibility. But, like *Grounded*'s Arachnophobia Safe Mode, *Ikenfell* makes space for inclusive mental health. Creator Chevy Ray says, "[O]ur sensitivity consultation team [Joanna Blackhart, Jeriko Green and Aivi Tran] made a really good case for adding in an option to enable context-sensitive content warnings in the game."

These content warnings appear in-game and before skippable cutscenes that contain potentially triggering content, such as self-injury. "This is an extremely rare feature for any game to have, even in AAA companies that take accessibility very seriously. The feature has been immensely well-received, so I hope it's a feature more companies adopt in the future."

Ikenfell is a colourful turn-based tactical RPG about magical students and pettable cats. Cast a multitude of spells, and hit the button at just the right time to land a great hit and do critical damage – or mitigate it, when you're defending. Notably, you can toggle how much timing affects gameplay (if at all). For players who would still find combat inaccessible, they would typically have to not play the game – but in *Ikenfell* they can take the option to instantly win fights

at any moment. "One of these options has them playing through the game and getting to experience the rest of its art, music, sounds, puzzles, and story. The other does not. I think it's probably quite obvious which of those two things I consider the superior choice."

SOULS-DISLIKE

Ikenfell's skippable combat highlights the debate about the way games are 'supposed' to be played. Games that are well loved for being difficult – you know the ones – are often passionately defended by their fans because they're supposed to be a challenge. The mastery of the game, and its mechanics, are its own reward, and making any part of it skippable (or easier) in the name of accessibility would defeat the point, goes the argument.

A counterpoint: *Frostpunk* is a difficult game, and I've poured tens of hours into it trying to get the best possible outcome for every single campaign, for fun. When playing games like *Dishonored*, I set specific challenges – don't be seen and don't use powers and loot all the art, etc. I like being challenged, but that doesn't translate to, say, the precise timing required of *Hollow Knight*. The Mantis Lords move faster than I can see.

'Difficulty' is a broad concept, so it's hard to pin down how it relates to accessibility. When a specific barrier is 'making' a game difficult, addressing that barrier is often a more straightforward solution. At the same time, what we think of as an 'easy mode' is a shorthand for a set of tools that reduces a game's demands. Those tools are still accessibility tools, particularly for players with chronic fatigue, pain, and/or impaired reflexes.

As an alternative, some difficult games in recent years have opted to implement assist modes – platformer *Celeste*'s being one of the most well-known. Rather than dropping mechanical complexity by an arbitrary level, players can fine tune effects as needed like Madeline's stamina, or number of dashes, allowing the player more time to think or to course correct. Any assist mode is tailored for the gameplay it's accompanying – compare an invulnerable Madeline climbing through the murder-fungus to *Control*'s Jesse, flinchingly hit by every bullet even when invincible.

Some players maintain that difficult games without any way to make them more accessible are 'the developer's vision', but accessibility specialist Ian Hamilton explains that this is one of the most common misconceptions that players have about how game development works.

"What designers have in mind for their players is really about an emotional experience. And that thing on the disc or that you've just downloaded is not the vision, it's not an experience in itself. It's just a means to an end, a framework put in place to try [to] let players have that kind of experience. The experience only comes into existence through interaction with the player – and players are a varied bunch, so whether what they experience matches the designer's intent depends on how that framework interacts with their own personal needs, abilities and preferences."

TOP: *Hollow Knight*'s unwinding environmental storytelling is beautiful – but locked behind inaccessible gameplay.

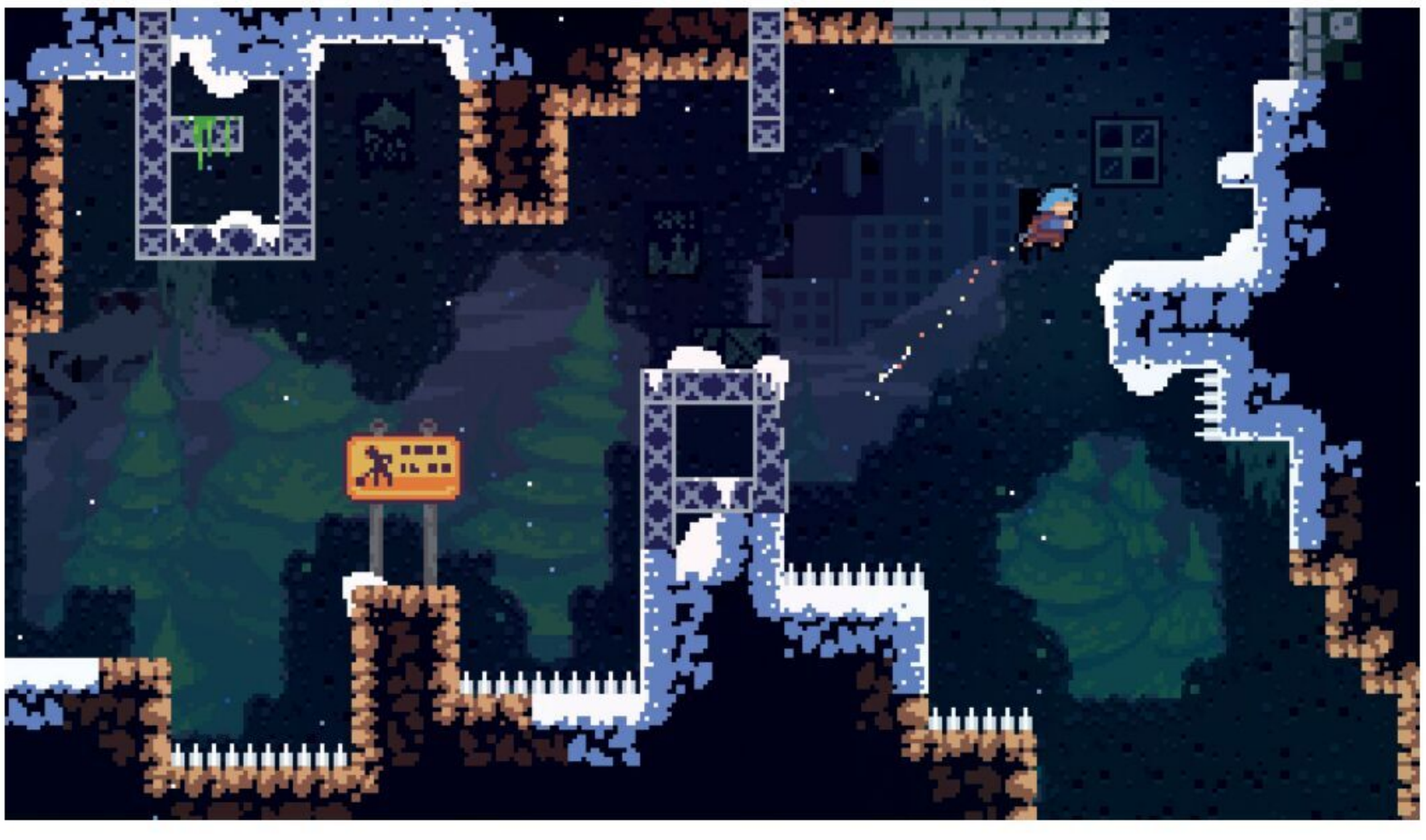
ABOVE: Eerie action-adventure *Control* introduced its assist mode a year after its initial release.

'Difficult games' aren't a monolith, and no one game is difficult for the same reason as another. Whether it's to challenge players, for narrative theming, or to encourage players to fully juice a combat system, every difficult game wants the player to have a certain experience. That experience does not inherently need to leave out disabled players.

STARTING LINE

We might celebrate innovations in accessibility in games, but that only suggests that there are leaps and bounds to go – even if we are making them. "The state of the field is quite unrecognisable compared to even a few short years ago," Hamilton says, reflecting on his 16 years of experience in the industry. "It wasn't long ago that a single mainstream game including a single accessibility accommodation was big news, and now it's hard to find any big name game that doesn't have a swathe of considerations, and indies are right there at the forefront of progress too.

"But we're still really only at the start. There hasn't yet been any AAA that has managed to nail all of the basics, things like remapping, subtitle presentation, colour-blindness, text



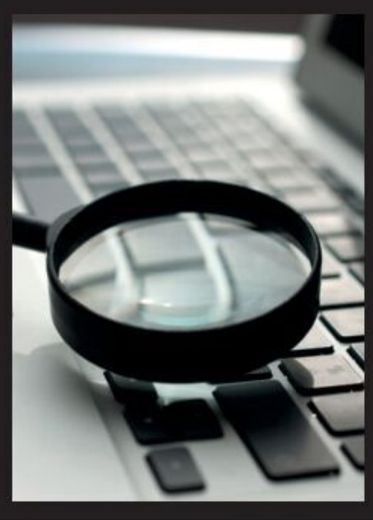
“THE STATE OF THE FIELD IS QUITE UNRECOGNISABLE COMPARED TO EVEN A FEW SHORT YEARS AGO”

FIX THIS PLEASE

The four most complained about accessibility issues

REMAPPING

Remapping (or rebinding) has a huge number of accessibility applications, from macros and alternative controller use to remapping individual keys that are uncomfortable to use. Like thumbstick-clicks, which are the worst. As it stands, too few games offer robust options for players to make these changes, which can exclude many.



TEXT SIZE

Text in videogames is too small, and therefore, difficult to read. This a universal design complaint that comes from people who wouldn't consider themselves as having vision problems (along with those who explicitly do). Some games have large text, or text size options – but I've yet to see the complaint that text is too large.

COLOUR BLINDNESS

Many games exclusively use colour to communicate important information, from using coloured silhouettes to indicate enemies and friendlies to featuring colour-based puzzle solutions. For the large amount of players who can't differentiate those colours easily (or at all), that information is lost. Friendly fire, everywhere.

SUBTITLE PRESENTATION

There are many factors that affect whether subtitles are actually useful or not. Tiny text is a frequent offender, along with putting more text on-screen than can be easily read at once. And once that's resolved – is it made clear who's speaking? Where the sound is coming from? Is the call coming from inside the house? We need that info.

size, and effect/camera intensity. And we are a very very long way from getting beyond that to where [we] really need to be, which is any gamer being able to pick up any game and have a reasonable expectation that they'll be able to play, that they won't be unnecessarily locked out or have an unnecessarily poor experience."

The relative accessibility of a game is a hard thing as a consumer to predict. I can pick up a physically undemanding adventure game and find myself waylaid by flashing lights and tiny tiny text, or demo an upcoming action game and find incredibly comprehensive difficulty settings. The one thing consistent with most people I spoke to, however, was that awareness of accessibility in development has increased hugely in only a short amount of time. Developers care, and there's a meaningful push for games to be more accessible and more inclusive. With the development cycle of games being the length it is, I'm excited to see what will be winning accessibility awards in 2022. ■

Intro

Games

YOUR GUIDE TO THE LATEST PC GAMES.

GAMES THIS ISSUE

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SCORING SYSTEM

PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 100 scale. The higher, the better – though 100 is by no means a "perfect" game. We're not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 100 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 50 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn't excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you'll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

POWERED BY
REPUBLIC OF GAMERS

SOMETHING NEW...

OLD WORLD is a historical 4X that feels like the future.

By Fraser Brown

The story of my first campaign in *Old World*, where I led my Greek civilisation to global domination, is equally the story of Rome, my nemesis. When I first encountered the Romans, they were friendly, offering us goodies and hospitality, but it was a poisoned chalice – quite literally. A sickness spread, and Roman gifts were the source. I demanded justice and compensation; Rome only wanted war. It would take nearly 200 years until I got my revenge.

It was not a single continuous war, but rather an eternal grudge. The first conflict ended without much resolution, with the distance between our empires and the massive mountain chain that separated us creating some logistical difficulties. There were still battles, certainly, costing both of us more than soldiers. Family members, revered generals and close friends also lost their lives. Between the wars were heated diplomatic meetings and espionage, which again cost lives. RIP Confucius, philosopher-turned-spy.

Despite using the language of *Civilization* – from workers to wonders – it should be starting to become clear that Soren Johnson and Mohawk Games' take on the historical 4X formula is quite different to Firaxis's approach. There are many similarities, which should not be a surprise given that Johnson was also the lead designer of *Civ 4*, but *Old World* feels like a meaningful evolution. And a welcome one.

The most notable advancement is the importance placed on people. Like *Crusader Kings*, you are not an immortal ruler... Your famous starting ruler will eventually die. When Philip II left this mortal coil, the empire passed to his son, Alexander, who'd become known as Alexander the Noble – sadly he didn't do enough to earn the 'Great' moniker. You've got heirs and succession laws to worry about, as well as a court full of potential friends and enemies.

Old World feels like a meaningful evolution, and a welcome one

COURTING TROUBLE

These courtiers, generals and other folk grow and react, increasing their attributes to become more disciplined or charismatic while also picking up traits like 'wanton' and 'schemer.' They have affairs, illegitimate children, and can plot the demise of other characters, including the ruler. In the mid-game, I found myself playing a talented king, beloved by his people and the triumvirate of influential families constantly vying for power and attention. His uncle, however, was not a fan. Years before, when I was playing as his father, I encouraged certain unpleasant traits in my son, which benefited me at the time. I had no idea I was creating a nephew-killer. When it came time to reap what I'd sowed, I had some regrets.

Much of this plays out through event pop-ups, typically giving you multiple options that depend on your traits and resources. You get to decide how children are educated, how you react to a diplomatic insult, or what to do with the possibly magical sword that was just dug up – I opted for starting a cult and charging them admission to see the fancy blade.

Often, you won't see the impact for years, so there's always a surprise around the corner. This contributes to a sense that you are truly shaping your own civilisation, and in ways that go beyond changing some stats.

If only the UI did a good job of keeping track of this. It can be jarring to go from the flavourful event text to the abstract, soulless numbers that the UI boils them down to. Every interaction is made a bit worse because it requires faffing around in counter-intuitive menus that drag you all over the screen. Even after winning my first campaign, I still found myself getting lost, and I still don't know how to find crucial information on things like the spread of religion. The tutorial and

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A turn-based 4X that's part *Civilization*, part *Crusader Kings*.

DEVELOPER
Mohawk Games

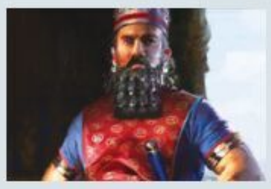
PUBLISHER
Mohawk Games

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080 Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
mohawkgames.com/oldworld

ORIGIN STORY *Old World's civs and original leaders*



1 Assyria starts with the religious Ashurbanipal and gets unique battering rams and siege towers.

2 Babylonia begins with scholarly Nebuchadnezzar ruling and boasts Akkadian and Cimmerian Archers.

3 Diplomatic Dido leads Carthage, which can field a pair of rather intimidating African elephant units.

4 Egypt begins with the construction-minded Hatshepsut and gets Light Chariots and Kushite Cavalry.

5 Militant Philip leads Greece, which can recruit Hoplites and Phalangites, unique infantry units.

6 Persia is led by the heroic Cyrus and defended by the likes of Palaton Cavalry and Cataphract Archers.

7 Rome starts with Romulus the tactician and can field Hastati and the iconic Legionaries.

ABOVE: Is that pyramid very small or is that elephant very big?

FAR RIGHT: Events add personality to your empire.

BELOW: Things aren't looking good for Ponus Aelius.

encyclopedia are of little help, choosing brevity and vagueness over clear instructions. There's much more context and clarity in the event text, so I wish *Old World's* writers were more involved in designing the interface, which could definitely benefit from their skills.

Alone, the events and characters would have been enough to grab my attention. *Civilization* and *Crusader Kings* are two of the greats, and combining their philosophies leads to a game that feels tailor made to my interests. But *Old World* is filled with new ideas and ways of doing things.

The focus on people benefits the diplomacy system immensely

ON THE MARCH

Every unit has a specific movement range and room for one action per turn, but without 'orders' they can't do anything, and those are limited. As you start expanding and fielding more units, you'll find yourself having to prioritise so that you don't find your tank is empty right when you're about to make a critical move. It's a complication, but sometimes it can actually take the pressure off you.

Orders are tied to legitimacy, another abstract resource. You improve the legitimacy of your reign by mostly being insular, promoting national unity and the people of your civilization above all else. This can mean that you treat foreigners with suspicion and take a 'strong' stance that will make the rest of the world rightly think you're a dickhead. It reflects how real leaders can fan the flames of national fervour and encourage small-minded attitudes.

You can, thankfully, still be an effective ruler without pandering to the worst aspects of national identity. Some buildings – which, I should add, are constructed by workers rather than from the city menu, letting you embark on several construction projects at the same time – generate small amounts of legitimacy that can give you a big boost. That's something *Old World* excels at: giving you more ways to achieve objectives. Resource management is another example. On top of the abstract stuff, there's also more tangible resources like stone, iron, wood, and gold, which are required for trade and, more importantly, construction. It's a hungry game that demands a healthy stockpile. If you're running low, however, you can spend gold to buy more; if you're out of gold, you can sell whatever abundance you have.

When your larder is looking sparse, you can also seek help from fellow rulers. The focus on people benefits the diplomacy system immensely, as these are personal relationships that you're developing. Friendships with foreign leaders can be undone by the way an event plays out, but as always there are plenty of opportunities to repair the damage.

DO-OVER

If diplomacy fails, you might find yourself heading to war. Combat is one of the places that feels most evocative of modern *Civilization*, which is unfortunate, because I'm getting a bit bored of moving all these units around one by one, surrounding cities and battering enemies. That's not to say it hasn't been improved... For one, there's the undo move (or even turn) ability, which is a blessing. You'll never find yourself making mistakes from a misclick or miscalculation. You can also recruit generals from your court, which may have handy abilities, like being able to heal units even in neutral territory.

Throughout my time with *Old World* I kept coming across things that made me think, "why hasn't *Civ* done this?" It has solutions to many 4X niggles that have been around for ages. Take research, for instance. When you choose your next research project, the game produces a few offerings from a deck made up of all the stuff you're ready to discover. So instead of picking from the same list over and over again, it's slightly randomised, and alongside new techs are bonus cards that give you gifts, like a free unit. If you're in the middle of a war, do you really care about unlocking the magical power of mills? Instead, you can spend a turn or two on getting a free spearman.

It's a shame it peters out towards the end. The simplest method of winning is by earning 52 points before 200 years pass, which you do by nurturing your cities and building wonders. If nobody gets to 52, the highest wins. You can also get an early win if you double the points of the next nation, but only if you're already halfway to 52. Then there's the Ambition victory, where you win if you manage to complete ten personal goals. If you don't finish them in your life, they become legacy goals that your heir can complete. Finally, you can wipe everyone out. It's a bit perfunctory, and quite gamey. I was lucky that my first win happened as I conquered my nemesis Rome, because without that it wouldn't have been memorable.

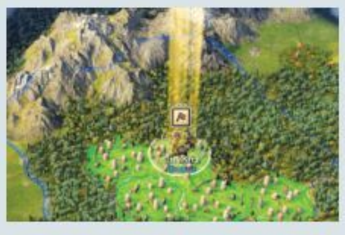
Despite its understated victories, *Old World* is a brilliant 4X, and one that I'd suggest over *Civilization*. It feels like a step forward for the genre, boasting so many inventive, smart design decisions. And I can't believe I've reached the end of the review before mentioning the soundtrack from composer Christopher Tin. *Civ 4's* Baba Yetu might still be my favourite of his pieces, but *Old World* is full of evocative orchestral and choral compositions. There's a lot to love here, and if you've got an itch to conquer the ancient world you need to give this a go. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A clever spiritual successor to *Civilization* full of both novelties and big ideas, but a few (minor) wrinkles.

87

URBAN PLANNING *How Old World cities are born*



GET STARTED
Cities can only be built in certain places, making the race to expand more tense. It also means you won't end up somewhere awful.

CHOOSE A LEADER
Every city has a ruling family that you get to pick. Each family has its own focus and interests, like construction or warfare.

EXPAND
Cities are used to recruit units, but construction is done by workers that develop tiles around them, erecting various buildings.

CLAIM VICTORY
Each city has a points value, depending on its size, and together with wonders contribute to your total victory points.

RISE ABOVE

THE ASCENT is a quality action-RPG set in a mind-blowing cyberpunk city

By Andy Kelly

Along with thousands of other galactic migrants, your character in *The Ascent* pays a small fortune for a ticket to the planet Veles, looking for a better life. The moment you step off the ship, however, the price of the ticket becomes a debt so astronomical that you'll die before you can pay it off.

Even so, the company that owns the city you now call home, the Ascent Group, wants its pound of flesh. You are now an indent – slang for an indentured servant – working dirty, dangerous jobs to pay it off.

The Ascent's setting, a mix of neon-flecked '80s cyberpunk and grimy science fiction, is magnificent. The story takes place in an Arcology – a self-contained city squeezed into an immense skyscraper.

Think Hong Kong's Kowloon Walled City, crossed with Akira's Neo Tokyo, and populated by the aliens from the Mos Eisley cantina. It's an urban crush of tight-knit markets, bustling plazas, and concrete valleys buzzing with streams of flying cars.

It's a hell of a setting, and one of the most compelling cyberpunk worlds on PC. But what do you actually do in it? Well, *The Ascent* is an action-RPG, with an emphasis on the *action*, that you can play alone or with up to three friends in co-op.

One of the most compelling cyberpunk worlds on PC

It's a gloriously chunky, brutal isometric shooter where you run around that gorgeous city blowing enemies away with shotguns and churning them into a fine bloody mist with rattly machine-guns. Loot, money, and power-ups sprinkle out of their corpses, and scooping these up provides a constant stream of tiny, pleasing dopamine hits.

Loot comes in the form of weapons and various bits of cyberpunk-themed armour to play dress-up with, including glowing visors and mechanical limbs.

Playing with a mouse and keyboard, it's WASD to move, mouse to aim. With a gamepad, it's a twin-stick shooter. Both work well, but the extra precision of the mouse aiming just clinched it for me.

Crouch behind something and you can raise your gun with the left trigger or the right mouse button, shooting over the top of whichever chunk of debris you happen to be squatting near. If you double tap the spacebar (or A button) you can evade enemies with a fast roll. All these elements combine to create a really great-feeling shooter that involves more than just pointing and blasting.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cyberpunk action-RPG with guns, lots of guns

DEVELOPER
Neon Giant

PUBLISHER
Curve Digital

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080 Super, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
curve-digital.com

UP AND COMING

Don't be fooled by the existence of a cover system: the relentless rhythm of *The Ascent*'s combat forces you to be in near-constant motion. Gun-toting enemies are accompanied by large groups of melee grunts. They push forward aggressively, never giving you a chance to get settled or get too comfortable behind cover.

When you begin the game, your lowly indent is working a job in the Deepstink, the lowest part of the city. But as you make a name for yourself, working as a mercenary for an influential crime boss, you find yourself rising to the top – literally.

TOP: The level of detail is incredibly impressive.

RIGHT: One of the many busy, crowded marketplaces in the Arcology.

The game often treats you to a stunning view of the city.

ABOVE: Gamblers throwing their money away in the Golden Satori casino.

FAR RIGHT: Enemies come in all shapes and sizes, including bloody massive.

The story takes you from the stinking depths of the Arcology to increasingly higher, more opulent levels, all of which have a very different aesthetic and vibe.

This is fundamentally a game about shooting lots of people dead, including gangsters, corporate soldiers, and hulking mechs. But there are some quiet moments too. In crowded social hubs you can shop, talk to NPCs, and pick up sidequests without fear of being attacked.

I had issues with sudden, sharp difficulty spikes, some of which forced me to break off from the story and grind sidequests to level up. I wouldn't mind this if the sidequests were consistently good, but I found them pretty hit and miss.

Some keep you hooked with a good story. But others feel a little like busywork, with a lot of walking long distances between districts.

But whenever the game does something to disappoint me, the world always wins me back. From the lavish Golden Satori casino to the bleak Black Lake slums, this is a masterclass in creating a sense of place. *The Ascent* is a superb shooter elevated by a great setting. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

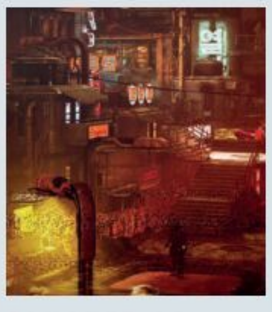
A lovingly crafted action-RPG with satisfying gunfights and an exceptional cyberpunk setting.

84

CITY SLICKER

The Arcology's coolest locations

CODER'S COVE
An underground hacker's lair, hidden away in the flooded Black Lake district. You'll find all kinds of shady characters.



CLUSTER 13
A cramped collection of habitation pods, which are tiny apartments. There are some great dive bars here.

HIGHSTREET
A busy commercial district, lit up by thousands of neon billboards and protected by security guards and mechs.

DEEPSTINK
The bowels of the Arcology. A mess of pipes and machinery, with giant insect-like robots maintaining the place.

NUCLEAR OPTIONS

CHERNOBYLITE is that rare game that makes you feel the weight of your decisions

By Robert Zak

Chernobylite is a curious mash-up of ideas orbiting around a pretty stiff first-person shooter framework. But it feels more inviting thanks to its evocative setting and cast of grizzled scavengers. Despite some shortcomings, it succeeds as a game about choice, where you're constantly faced with quandaries that may meaningfully affect the hero Igor's journey as he chases spectral visions of his wife around the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.

Killing a sketchy character early on might lead to an awkward impasse with his wife later, split-second decisions about whether or not to save stalkers from patrolling army guards will dictate how many allies and enemies you have in the Zone, and at every key point you'll have companions radioing in to persuade you to do stuff.

Each time you die, you wake up in a dreamscape where you can see how the key decisions you made are connected, and go back and change those decisions using mysterious *Chernobylite* shards as payment to whatever interdimensional god-force is running the show.

It's pretty ballsy for a game to lay bare its choice system like this, but given the breadth of *Chernobylite*'s web of choices, the devs have every right to want to show it off.

Between missions you hang out in your base, where you can cook, build improvements, explore other peoples' memories based on clues you find, or even just go straight to the Heist mission at the end of the game. When you're ready, you pick a mission set in one of six regions around the Zone – where you can progress the main story or search for clues. At the same time, you can send out your companions to scout future missions or gather resources.

Combat gets a bit tangled between shooter, stealth, and RPG

PRACTICALLY GLOWING

These maps aren't huge, but they look wonderful. But it's a shame that there's not more going on in these finely crafted areas. The only things you find are resources and clues relating to Igor's story, there is no wildlife and enemy AI rigidly sticks to their patrol routes – never sitting at desks or fighting radioactive monsters or having a wee.

The combat gets a bit tangled between realistic shooter, stealth, and RPG. Beyond a rather pathetic side-dash, there are no mechanics like sliding or cover-firing, while leaping over obstacles is semi-functional at best.

Thankfully, stealth is a viable approach, so I upgraded my revolver with a silencer and became a master of silent takedowns. Again though, this feels a little threadbare as you can't hide bodies. It all speaks to a combat system that's stretched between multiple styles without particularly excelling in any of them.

What really gives *Chernobylite* its soul are the people you recruit to your base. There are five in total, each with their traumas, missions, and stories to tell. I grew particularly fond of Mikhail, always blaring like a drill sergeant about everything from boozy tales, to tarot readings, to an anecdote about radioactive sausages

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A non-linear shooter with a focus on survival and player choice

DEVELOPER
The Farm 51

PUBLISHER
All in! Games SA

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 7 5800H, Nvidia GeForce 3070, 16GB RAM

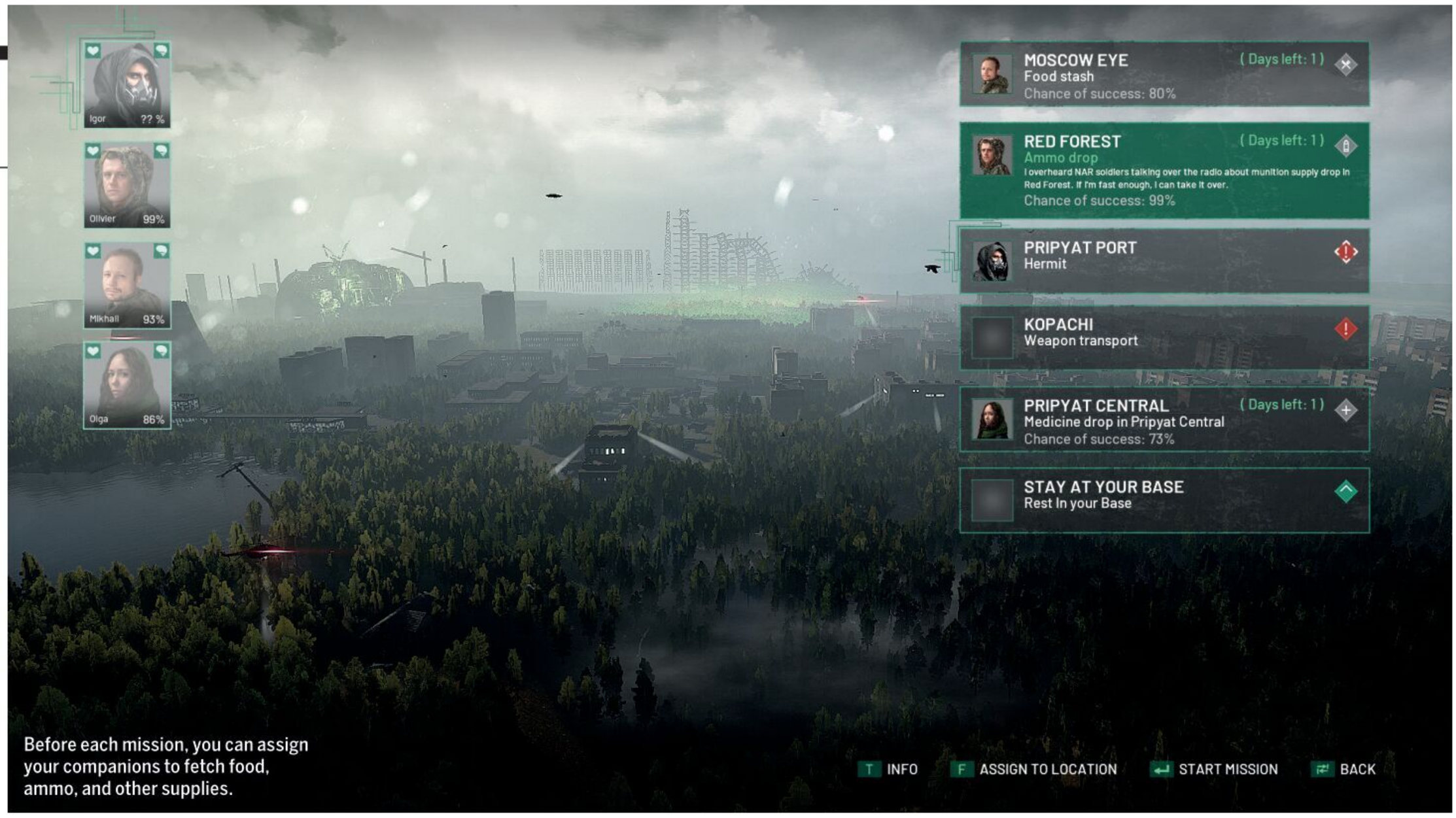
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
chernobylgame.com

ABOVE: Apparently tomato soup is a robust cure for radiation poisoning.

Professor Khymynuk, I presume? It's an honor to finally meet you in person. We've got a lot work to do, you and I.
Olga
Press ↵ to skip line

Your decisions may have long-reaching consequences – such as whether a character wants to kill or ally with you.


Igor ?? %
Ollvier 99%
Mikhail 93%
Olga 86%
MOSCOW EYE (Days left: 1)
Food stash
Chance of success: 80%
RED FOREST (Days left: 1)
Ammo drop
I overheard NAR soldiers talking over the radio about munition supply drop in Red Forest. If I'm fast enough, I can take it over.
Chance of success: 99%
PRIPYAT PORT
Hermit
KOPACHI
Weapon transport
PRIPYAT CENTRAL (Days left: 1)
Medicine drop in Pripyat Central
Chance of success: 73%
STAY AT YOUR BASE
Rest In your Base
T INFO
F ASSIGN TO LOCATION
START MISSION
BACK

Before each mission, you can assign your companions to fetch food, ammo, and other supplies.

ABOVE: The Farm 51's 3D scanning wizardry makes each of the six areas ripple with realism.

FAR RIGHT: Don't let the occasional jump-scare and jittery ghost-thing fool you into thinking this is a horror game.

distributed throughout the Soviet Union. It's solid, engaging writing, though I recommend using the Russian audio with subs unless you want Igor to push his voice like an over-eager Oxford academic.

There are a few half-baked quirks in *Chernobylite* that seem to exist to tick certain boxes. It's been termed 'survival horror', but monster encounters are scarce, and beyond that the very occasional jump-scare, creepy doll, or hallucination of a jittery man in a gas mask doesn't really justify the label. Similarly, the Black Stalker who beams himself into maps on a timer in later missions is more a nuisance than a threat when you realise he's rooted to the spot and can be blasted away. Mr X he most definitely is not.

Maybe *Chernobylite* latches onto these recognisable tropes because its greatest strengths aren't easily conveyed through trailers or genre tags. Its cast of characters and its choice system are genuinely gripping, while its depiction of the Zone is at times breathtaking.

Like its motley crew of mad companions, *Chernobylite* is a misfit that I can't help but like. ■

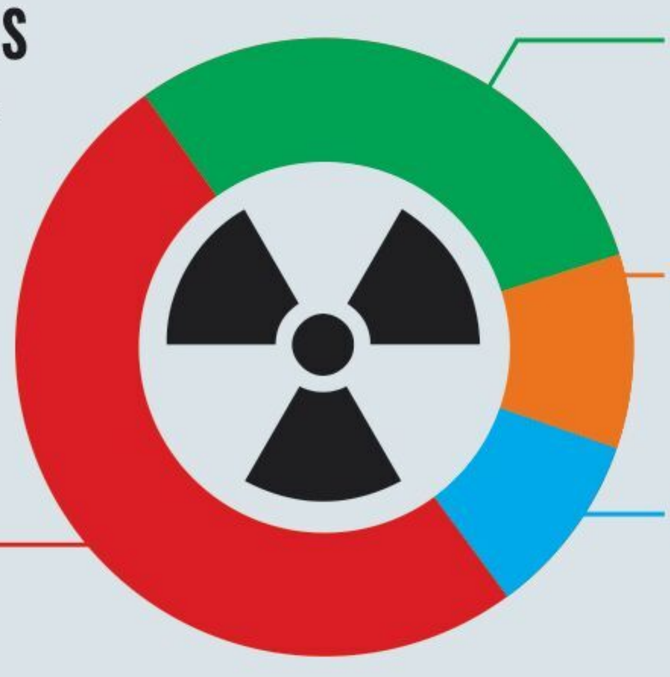
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Chernobylite is an ambitious and atmospheric adventure undercut by some simplistic mechanics.

78

MUTATIONS

Chernobylite dabbles in many genres – how much should you expect of each?



30% SURVIVAL
There's not a huge amount of stuff to beautify your rusting hangar.

10% HORROR
A couple of hours in, it seems to give up on its own horror clichés.

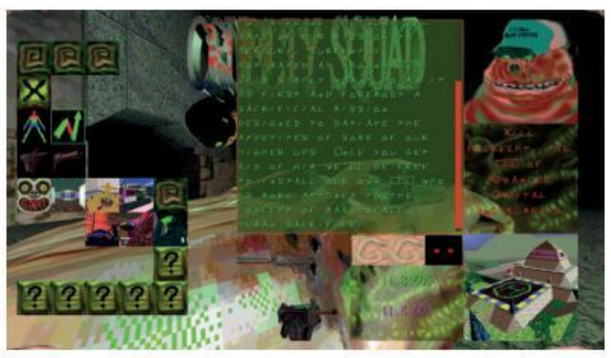
10% RPG
Labels itself an RPG on the Steam page, but it's basic.

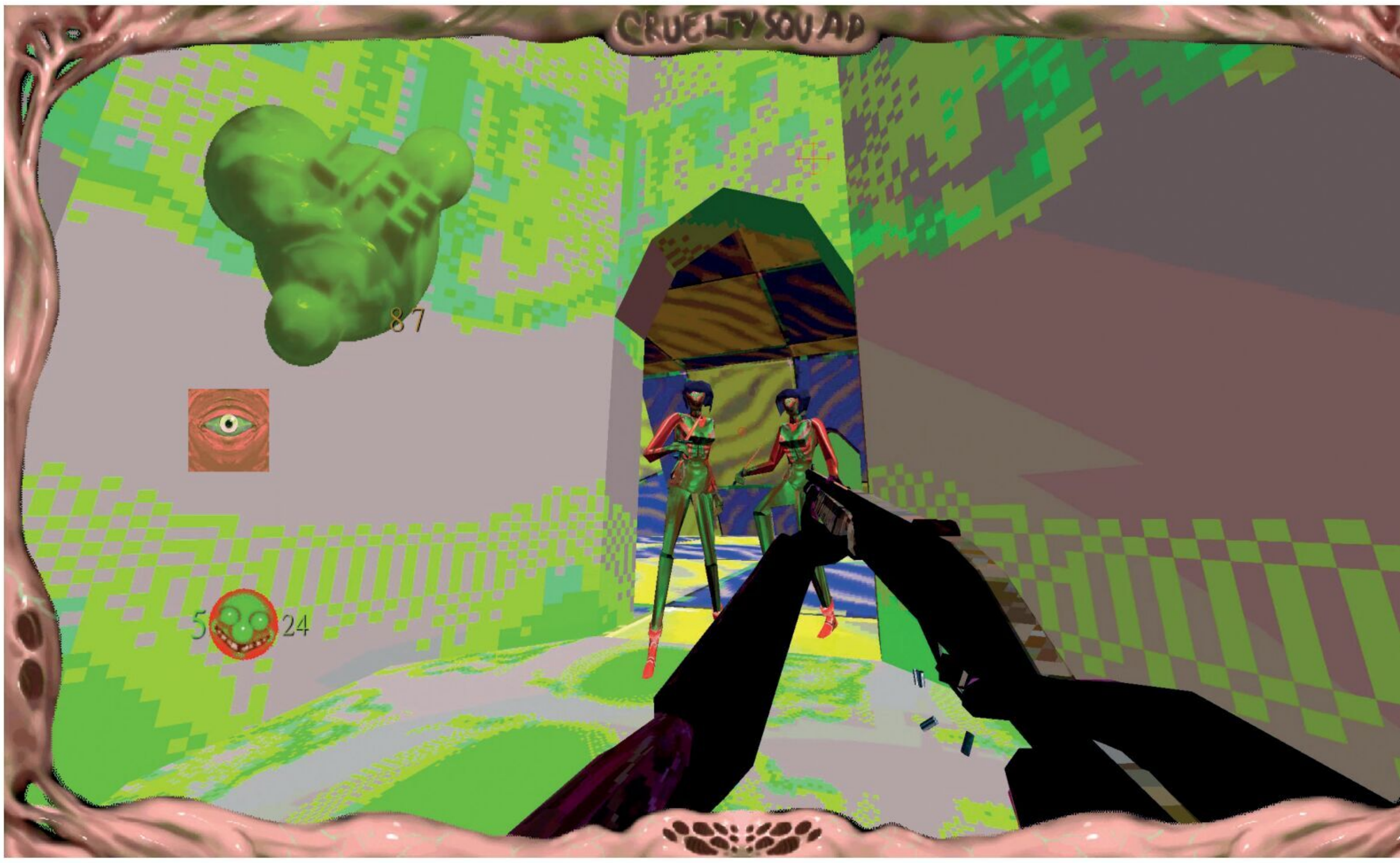
50% STORY-DRIVEN
The main story is enjoyably pulpy sci-fi.

ABOVE: Ah, a nice depression shower.

RIGHT: The menus make sense with some patience.

BELOW: Don't bring a knife to a gun fight.





THOUGHTLINE MIAMI

CRUELTY SQUAD, the reanimated corpse of a great immersive sim

By James Davenport

Just looking at *Cruelty Squad* can make you queasy, but it passes the most essential immersive sim tests with bright, nauseating colours. I used classic vent routes to stealthily assassinate a bouncy castle made of flesh one playthrough, switching to a rocket launcher and using my guts as a grappling hook for a more direct approach the next. I stacked barrels to climb over entire buildings, and picked off targets with sniper shots from across the map.

Cruelty Squad is *Deus Ex* if it were made today, the natural product of furious people exhausted by wealth inequality, police militarisation, and the stubborn structures that keep humanity rolling towards total annihilation of the soul.

But *Cruelty Squad* wants to have fun before the end. It's a stealth action game that props up the joy of feeling like I outsmarted the designers through wild experimentation, a cathartic exercise in taking out the worst people alive, and one of the most brilliantly absurd games I've played.

You're a depressed assassin for hire in the bad future

You're a depressed assassin for hire in the bad future. Pick out some guns and tools, then explore a level, finding the best routes for a clean kill.

Kills grant you cash for body mods, from basic stuff like armour to juiced up legs that give you a higher jump. And whatever guns you find and finish the mission with are added to your arsenal, now available to take into any mission. It's a super rewarding track that lets you explore playstyles while casting replays of previous levels in a new light.

Memorising their layouts is a joy. I'm happy dying on repeat to find the perfect sniper nest or infiltration route. The influx of new tools, be it a DNA-scrambling pistol or nightmare goggles, keeps things fresh.

Death kicks you back to the start of a mission, but *Cruelty Squad* never loses momentum. You can harvest organs from corpses and catch fish to sell on the stock market, keeping the cash flowing and the new body mods coming. There's even a gun with damage that scales to how much you have in holdings.

Cruelty Squad's spaces are easy to lose time in. I explored the same suburban neighborhood five times before I found the city below. I stumbled into a few hidden levels, each more surreal than the last. *Cruelty Squad*'s levels are so varied that it even turns into a full-on horror game at times.

The art is a grotesque wonder, a vision of a world under intense stress. Faces shift beneath the polygons, the skies bleed, and the soundtrack underlines the dread like a Game Boy melting into scorching blacktop. *Cruelty Squad* is one of the most upsetting games ever and I adore its total dedication to alienation.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A psychedelic assassination nightmare

DEVELOPER
Consumer Softproducts

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Nvidia RTX 3080, Intel i9-9900K, 30GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3qJNoPI

CRUEL INTENTIONS

Cruelty Squad's 20-plus weapons are fairly restrained. They have realistic handling, with significant recoil and spray that loses accuracy if you're peeking around corners, sustaining fire, or aiming from the hip. I'm partial to the New Safety M62 revolver, which has a lovely delay and subtle tilt animation to simulate the slow pull of a trigger.

Bizarrely, to reload you hold right-click and whip the mouse back. It feels great with time though, like shifting gears in a murderous man car. Reloading and retraining your aim before a guard turns and notices his dead pal behind him is a thrill.

That initial control shock also masks simple enemy AI. They just shoot on sight and pursue. A quick burst of concentrated fire can end you though, so clever AI isn't really the point. The point is sneaking into the centre of a hornet's nest to kill a sentient bouncy castle or a gross mayor, for example.

Once you know the layout, getting the better of the baddies is a little too simple. That's OK: *Cruelty Squad* transcends small problems with wild level design, the breadth of tools it gives me to explore them, and the perfect tension between fun and disgust it maintains throughout.

Cruelty Squad's world is sick and all by terrible, beautiful design. What's left is the skeleton of our favourite pastime: a computer game. And holy cow, it's a good one. ■

BIO-MOD BOD

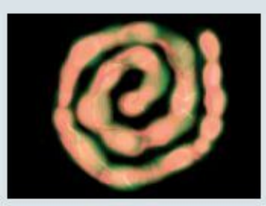
The tools you'll take into the field

SKULLGUN
A gun in your skull. You take a point of damage for every shot, which sounds like fair penance.

BOUNCY SUIT
Fall damage is no more, but you are now a human bouncy ball. Expect to fly as high as you fall.

GUNKBOOSTERS
Goopy alien holes that allow you to fart your way up to greater heights in mid-air. Lovely!

LIFE SENSOR
See any living entity through walls, marked by a green dot, which is very helpful indeed.



GRAPPENDIX
Send out your guts as a grappling hook. Not particularly sanitary, but all that airtime is worth it.

AMMO GLAND
Auto reloading! Secrete it directly into your gun! It's natural, so you know it's healthy.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Cruelty Squad by Consumer Softproducts celebrates feeling bad in every way, all of them fun.

93

ABOVE: As long as you had fun making it, that's all that matters.

RIGHT: Beautiful lighting brings dioramas to life.

Every level is made from parts you can get in real life.

All the fun of Lego, with none of the tidying up!

LEGO ISLANDS

LEGO BUILDER'S JOURNEY captures the joy of those little plastic bricks

By Alistair Jones

When I was little, I had a crate of Lego pieces. Once new sets had been built and enjoyed, they were dismantled to become more fuel for the crate, a seemingly bottomless well of colourful, constructive opportunity from which entire worlds could spill forth. Lego has been incorporated into dozens of games since the mid-1990s, but none of them bring the magic of my crate to life like *Lego Builder's Journey*.

Each of the dioramas that make up *Lego Builder's Journey* is shaped by a single goal – to bring your character from one side of the level to the other. There is, however, no prescribed solution to any puzzle. In true Lego style, you're free to use the blocks provided any way you like. It's often an iterative process, but one with no fail states or wrong answers. Your solution needn't be elegant or efficient. If the pieces fit together, there will be some kind of way forward.

The pieces themselves handle in a way almost as satisfying as the real thing, snapping into place or rattling against each other as you comb through them. It's an amazingly tactile experience, bolstered by the incredible detail on offer in each diorama, all of which are created entirely from actual pieces.

Even the story, a simple narrative of parental responsibility and childish imagination, speaks to what Lego has always attempted to invoke. For the parent figure, play must be pushed aside for the monotony of work, while for the child, the wonders of the natural world make way for the wonders of their imagination. A robot companion comes to life, turning the browns and greens of dioramas inspired by hiking trails and remote campsites into the vibrant primary colours of children's TV. A healthy dose of slapstick and childish naivety ensures *Lego Builder's Journey* never deviates too far from its toybox origins, but the dark, industrial nature of later levels means that its more serious ideas land. While other Lego games lean on the bombast of massive crossovers, Light Brick Studios focuses on what it's actually like to play with those little coloured blocks. It's a subtle approach, but one that obfuscates the game's limited scope, capturing everything from the imaginative freedom that Lego offers to the feeling of handling each individual brick.

It focuses on what it's actually like to play with those coloured blocks

STRUCTURAL DAMAGE

Across the levels that made up the original mobile version of *Lego Builder's Journey*, the game gently twists and turns, picking up ideas and dropping them again at will. Throughout the earlier stages, the sandbox style persists, with the few levels in which there's a more defined solution often trying to highlight a specific theme. Limited perspectives lead to some issues with transparency, but the difficulty curve remains steady throughout, often relying on the complexity of the bricks you use rather than the puzzles themselves when it ramps up. When the original finale does arrive, it's an excellent capstone to story, theme and design.

Unfortunately, later levels maintain little sense of that gentle progression. Those included in this PC version but not available in the original release introduce a new approach. Rather than use complete bricks, these puzzles allow you to stitch together fragments or duplicate the blocks you've already made, adding an unwelcome element of experimentation.

Within the beautiful environments and open-ended approach to puzzle solving, *Lego Builder's Journey* is perhaps the most authentic, earnest Lego game there's ever been. From the sense of freedom that a pile of bricks offers right down to the individual bricks between your fingers, it manages to recreate not just what Lego is, but what it can be. The attempt to build on its finely sculpted original outing is clumsy, sacrificing much of the open-ended approach that makes it so successful, but the way in which it captures with such care and attention something so beloved through its physicality and tactility, even in this virtual format, makes this a very special game. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A puzzle game about building with Lego

DEVELOPER
Light Brick Studio

PUBLISHER
Lego Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-5820K CPU @ 3.30GHz, 8GB RAM, Nvidia Geforce 950, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3h9KGyA

BRICKING IT

A brief history of Lego games

LEGO ISLAND
1997
Lego Island focused on the adventures of hapless youth Pepper Roni and a crime spree.

LEGO STAR WARS
2005
The game that spawned dozens of crossovers.

THE LEGO MOVIE VIDEOGAME
2014
The embodiment of modern Lego as a crossover-fueled powerhouse.

LEGO FUN TO BUILD
1995
Released in Japan on Sega's educational Pico console, *Fun to Build* pushed the envelope.

LEGO CREATOR: HARRY POTTER
2001
Let players use Potter-themed blocks to build.

LEGO UNIVERSE
2010
Lego's attempt to cash in on the MMO craze lasted barely 15 months.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Lego Builder's Journey from Light Brick Studios proves that while not everything is awesome, some stuff is quite good.

72

FOR THE ORDER

Go out without a limb in **CHIVALRY II**'s glorious medieval battles

By Tyler Wilde

To put it bluntly, this game is some of the most fun you can have on PC right now. It's a riveting, theatrical medieval warfare game that's equally about martial arts mastery and roleplaying as a Middle Ages buffoon. Sometimes you spend 30 intense seconds expertly duelling another player with swords, other times you're skewered by a ballista bolt while shaking your fist and declaring that you're "power incarnate".

At the centre of *Chivalry II* are 64-player team objective-based matches. These are multi-stage battles that see castles sieged with rolling towers and ladders, peasants slaughtered, and caravans ambushed. They all start roughly the same way: both teams lined up and sprinting at each other with swords, axes, polearms, maces, bows, and more. I approach these charges by smashing the 'yell' key to howl stupidly, throwing my shield into the mass of bodies, chucking my sword after it, and then meeting the enemy with hacks from my secondary axe. If I'm lucky, I break through the line and chase down the cowardly archers who stopped running 50 yards short of the fight.

Subsequent lives in *Chivalry II*'s objective maps have quieter beginnings. You spawn a short jog away from the front line, where one team is trying to accomplish a typically medieval goal (burn the tents, push the siege towers, destroy the trebuchet), while the other stands in the way. Each map tells the story of a battle between two factions, the Agathians and the Masons, a setup that could have been superfluous, but which is treated with such comedic seriousness that it feels essential. There's even a lore codex.

I always try to win, but treating *Chivalry II* like an esport is like expecting WWE Hell in a Cell matches to adhere to the rules of Greco-Roman wrestling. It's theatre. Sometimes you'll come across two players bowing at each other, or crouching up and down. What are they doing? It doesn't matter. Leave them be. If I need a break from blocking, kicking, jabbing, feinting and riposting, I'll pick up someone's head or whatever else I can find lying around and stand around shouting.

Each map tells the story of a battle between two factions

PARRY ME

The casual atmosphere somewhat belies *Chivalry II*'s complex and challenging melee combat system. Its best achievement is that it is possible to fight multiple opponents and win. You could see it simply being pointless: getting hit interrupts your attacks, so how could you have a chance with multiple enemies trying to hit you? The answer is counters and ripostes, specially timed attacks which briefly block all incoming attacks. With skill, it's possible to win a one-on-three, and it feels like being Henry Cavill's Geralt in the scene where he gets the 'butcher' moniker.

Chivalry II's 2012 predecessor was made by modders turned pro developers, and that do-it-yourself PC heritage shows here. *Chivalry II* has auto matchmaking if you want, but also features a server browser, with support for custom dedicated servers on the update roadmap. The essential graphics options are all there (arbitrary resolution, unlocked framerate, FOV slider, motion blur toggle), and the art is fantastic.

It can be a bit janky, though. One time I accidentally teamkilled a guy because hucking bandages into his face registered as damage instead of healing. Bug fixes are coming, but *Chivalry II* will probably never be perfectly well-behaved software. (Games described as 'polished' tend not to be this fun, though, so maybe it's for the best.)

New maps are also on the way, and eventually horses. Those content updates will be free. The only in-game purchase I can see is a currency that lets you unlock cosmetic items faster than you would by playing. The weapon unlocks (which have to be earned) increase your loadout options at a reasonable pace. It's a fine way to provide milestones for newcomers, but I like playing *Chivalry II* because it's fun to win fights or come up with stupid roleplaying ideas, not because I'm driven to unlock more stuff. It's a novel idea, games that are fun regardless of how much stuff you can collect, but I think it may catch on. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
64-player medieval warfare with melee weapons, bows and big set pieces

DEVELOPER
Torn Banner Studios

PUBLISHER
Tripwire Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-9600K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia RTX 2070 Super

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
chivalry2.com

THE SIEGE OF RUDHELM

How an objective-based battles plays out

1 The Agathians escort two giant siege towers to the Mason walls.

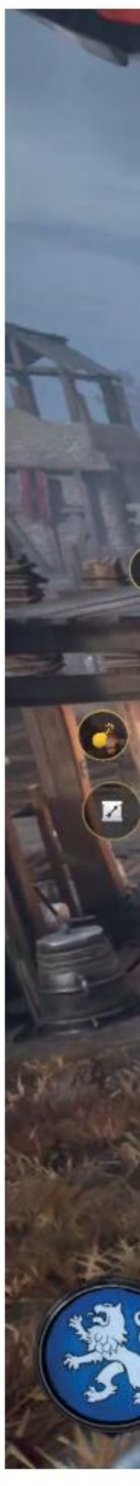
2 The Masons do their best to defend a capture point on the wall.

3 The Agathians burn a bunch of tents, which seems unnecessary.

4 After rudely burning some tents, the Agathians push siege ramps through the town.

5 With the last walls scaled, the Masons try to hold the gallows outside the central keep.

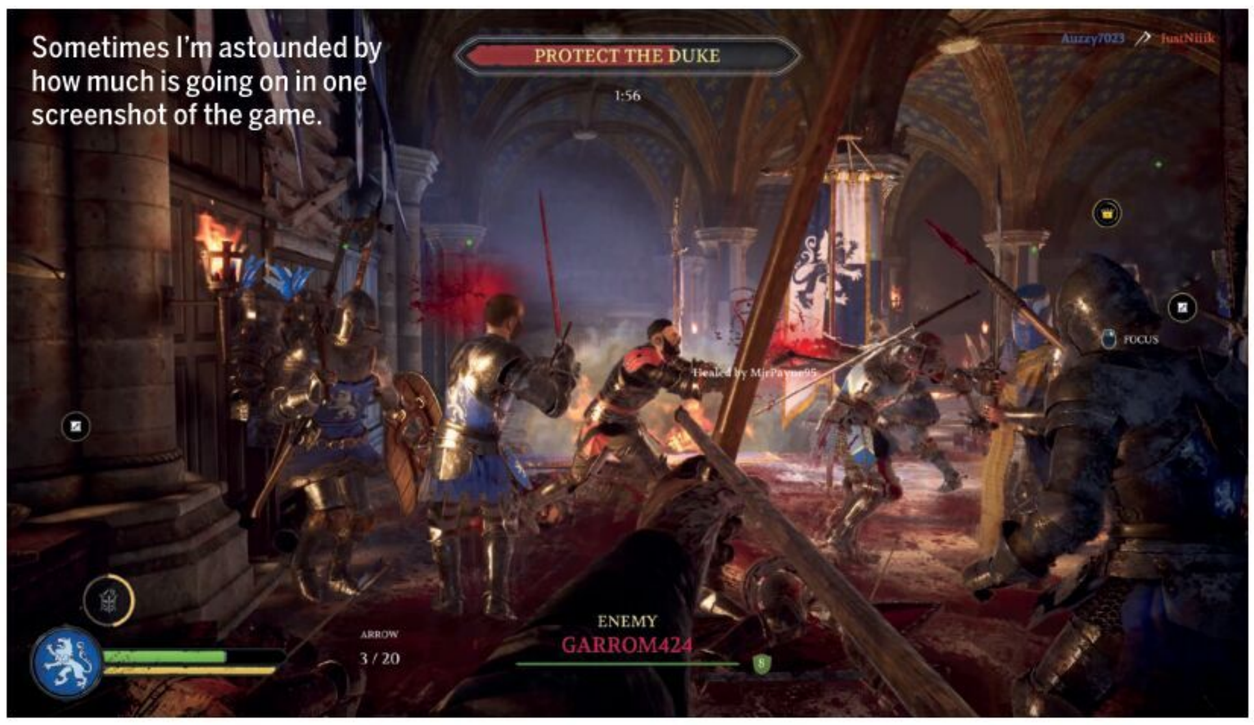
6 Inside the keep, the highest-scoring Mason player spawns as the Heir.



PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Chivalry II is a brilliant mix of high skill and low comedy, and is certainly the best medieval combat game out there.

91



ABOVE: The meaty fists, the tonsure top, the grinning 'stache: truly a dude's dude.

LEFT: The moment before I brain this guy with my favourite weapon.

In the right hands, a hatchet can match any sword.

Intro

Tech

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMING HARDWARE.

Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.

Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

GEAR THIS ISSUE

079 ROCCAT MAGMA
080 PC CONTROLLER GROUP TEST
084 GAMING CHAIR GROUP TEST

THE PCPP TESTBENCH

CPU INTEL I7 7700K INTEL.COM.AU
MOBO ASUS Z270 ROG CROSSHAIR VI HERO ASUS.COM.AU
RAM 2 X BALLISTIX 8GB DDR4-3200 CRUCIAL.COM
PSU CORSAIR 850W PSU CORSAIR.COM
COOLING H105 CORSAIR COOLER WWW.CORSAIR.COM.AU

Roccat Magma

GAMING KEYBOARD

Roccat Magma

A budget board, but still really good value.

PRICE $99 **ONLINE** au.roccat.com

The Roccat Magma gaming keyboard proves that you don't need to settle on a limited design to save cash with a membrane deck. Thanks to a distinctive panel with RGB lighting sitting underneath the main board, the Magma cleverly disguises a drop in aesthetic customization options with a replacement effect that some may even prefer.

Coming in at just $99, this is a particularly affordable piece of kit. However, unlike many other cheap gaming keyboards, you're not skimping on too much to keep that cost low. As it stands, the Magma will serve a wide range of everyday play styles well. It won't live up to the performance you'll find in the best gaming keyboards further up the price bracket, but on the flip-side, no-one is expecting it to.

The Magma's most noticeable feature is a translucent plastic panel covering the deck beneath the keys. Rather than per-key RGB, the Roccat Magma opts for a set of ten LED lights stretched across this panel, and configurable in five zones of customization. If you're looking to pinpoint precision over the look and responses of your gaming keyboard, this certainly isn't a feature to gloss over as there is a definite drop in clarity and control. However, the resulting effect can prove surprisingly satisfying, especially when pooling just a couple of colors together for a more subtle glow.

You're still getting a smooth response and satisfying distance of travel.

While much of the Roccat Magma's design is overshadowed by that distinctive panel, the plastic shell that surrounds the deck is surprisingly sturdy. That said, the translucent sheet does have a little too much give when pushed to feel fully solid. It would take some considerable key hammering to put that much pressure on the plate in normal use, but it is certainly noticeable under closer inspection.

As for the key caps themselves, they use a smooth ABS plastic which doesn't offer too much in the way of grip but is to be expected at this price point. The downside? The legends on top of the caps aren't too well defined, and while things do improve with the RGB effect switched on, the top two rows suffered fading around the top edge of each character. If you're not used to feeling your way around those function and number keys, this might take some adjustment.

Despite all that, you are getting a full-sized deck here, with the exception of dedicated media controls, and a ridged palm rest as well.

TABITHA BAKER

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

With a unique design guaranteed to stand out, smooth and responsive membrane keys, and a strong macro functionality built in, the Roccat Magma gaming keyboard offers excellent value for money. You are losing a little sensitivity in the keys which, combined with the heavy actuation force, will hamper faster play, but overall, there's plenty of functionality here to offer a standout experience for the cash.

80

GROUP TEST

PC CONTROLLERS

When a keyboard and mouse just won't cut it, it's time to go analogue. *By Jacob Ridley*

It's not often you'll hear a PC gamer admit that the combo of keyboard and mouse is ill-suited for gaming. It does happen, though, and there are oodles of adventure games, sports games, and brawlers that play better on a controller. So, you'll want one of the best controllers close at hand for when you run into one.

There are many schools of thought on what makes one controller better than another, though, and the biggest divide undoubtedly comes down to thumbsticks: do you go for two parallel sticks, as is customary for Sony, or instead offer an asymmetrical approach? The latter championed by Microsoft, yet also an approach used by a good few more. Even if you firmly believe one layout is best, you'll want to consider other potential features, namely connectivity, compatibility, and adjustability.

1

Elite Wireless Series 2

XBOX **$249**

The best controller, no question

1 While the low cost and build quality of the standard Microsoft Wireless Controller has effectively made it pointless for any third-party company to make their own devices, the Elite controllers have never given pause for thought to the ephemeral notion of 'value'. As such the Elite Series 2 is a no-compromise controller that feels fantastic in your hands. The ergonomics are classic Xbox pad, but the feel of every button, stick, or trigger has been tailored to feel *just right* and the weighting make it feel balanced but also robust. It's eminently customisable, has USB Type-C charging (wirelessly through the case if you so desire), and a genuinely impressive battery life of up to 40 hours. The thumbsticks and triggers are an improvement over the original Elite, where I did find they would loosen up over extended use.

The only sign of wear over nearly two years of use of the Series 2 is one of my shoulder buttons will occasionally register a double-click.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → **Great battery life**
- → **USB Type-C charging**
- → **A great-feeling controller in the hand**

SPECS WEIGHT: 345G / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB TYPE-C, BLUETOOTH, 2.4GHZ XBOX WIRELESS / **BATTERY:** INTERNAL RECHARGEABLE BATTERY / **BATTERY LIFE:** UP TO 40 HOURS

Wireless Controller

XBOX **$99**

Why buy anything else?

2 When Microsoft created the original Xbox 360 controller it served notice to every third-party manufacturer that they might as well not bother making pads anymore. The massive Duke controller was crazy-big, but the redesigned 360 pad was another level, and what's more it was well made and as affordable as practically any other option out there, especially for the PC. Then the Xbox One controller just absolutely nailed the design, and this mildly updated version for the Series X/S is a perfect meeting of build quality, ergonomics, and value. It's not cheap – nor does it feel that way – but it's also about the same price as most decent, third-party controllers you could buy for the PC, and those won't be wireless. And it completely outshines its competitors on every level, from weight, to textured grip, to thumbsticks, to triggers.

This controller's only true rivals are Sony's similarly well-made, similarly affordable PS4 and PS5 pads, but for me it's the Xbox controller every time.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → **Bluetooth and Xbox connections**
- → **3.5mm headphone jack**
- → **Rechargeable packs sold separately**

SPECS WEIGHT: 281G / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB TYPE-C, BLUETOOTH, 2.4GHZ XBOX WIRELESS / **BATTERY:** 2X AA / **BATTERY LIFE:** UP TO 30 HOURS

COMES WITH AN EXCESSIVE NUMBER OF SHORTCUTS ON THE FRONT OF THE CONTROLLER

3

Wolverine Ultimate

RAZER **$218**

Clicky with a side of Chroma

3 What you're looking at here is Razer's attempt at the Xbox Elite Wireless Controller crown. But let's get the record straight early on: the Razer Wolverine Ultimate is not wireless. We love the Razer Wolverine Ultimate for lots of reasons, but its lack of wireless connectivity and relatively high price for a wired option has it losing out on our top recommendations.

If wireless isn't on your list of priorities, though, the Wolverine has a lot else to offer. For starters, it has some of the most satisfyingly clicky buttons in the biz. I'm talking a mechanical keyboard in controller form. I love this design decision, and the controller feels that little bit more rapid and responsive for it.

It also comes with an excessive number of shortcuts on the front of the controller, matched only by the sheer volume of triggers, levers, and adjusters on the rear of the pad. This thing is plastered in remappable buttons, which can be changed at a moment's notice with profiles in the Windows 10.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Interchangeable layout
- → Loud, satisfying buttons
- → Remappable buttons

SPECS WEIGHT: 272G / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB WIRED / **FEATURES:** HEAPS OF REMAPPABLE BUTTONS AND TRIGGERS, LED LIGHTING, ADJUSTABLE TRIGGERS AND VIBRATION, CLICKY SWITCHES

C40 TR

ASTRO **$399**

A premium PS4 pad for PC

4 The standard DualShock 4 still makes for a mighty controller on PC, but we've been keen to find another – something that can match what the mighty Elite is to the Xbox Controller but with the parallel analogue stick layout demanded by some. The C40 TR from Astro is an attempt to do just that.

On the surface it might look like your everyday controller but the C40 TR is a highly modular design. That means whatever the controller layout you're after, you can probably configure the C40 TR to accommodate. You could even relive the left-leaning asymmetrical thumbsticks of the Nintendo 64 controller if you really want to.

On the rear of the controller you'll find a few familiar features from the Elite pad. Adjustable trigger stops make for easy fine-tuning, while two rear triggers comfortably embedded in the grip ensure easy to reach shortcuts. Included software also makes editing profiles simple, and there's even an included equaliser for the controller's 3.5mm jack.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Remappable, interchangeable layout
- → Promising serviceability
- → Adjustable trigger stops

SPECS WEIGHT: 320G / **CONNECTIVITY:** 2.4GHZ WIRELESS, USB WIRED / **FEATURES:** INTERCHANGEABLE LAYOUT, REAR TRIGGERS, PS4 SUPPORT

CONNECT YOUR CONSOLE CONTROLLER TO PC

Modern controllers work on PC with next to no fuss, and that includes those destined for a life hooked up to the PS5 or Series X.

For wired connectivity, it couldn't get much simpler. You need only plug the controller into your PC with a compatible cable. Some features may be limited on a per controller, per game, basis, but Windows, and Steam, does wonders at offering support in many games. Similarly, a wireless connection is easily achieved via Bluetooth. Sony and Microsoft controllers have supported Bluetooth for years now, and it's as simple as pairing the device to your PC for a wire-free connection.

Spectra Enhanced

POWERA **$99**

Budget yet flashy

5 PowerA may not be a household name yet, but they're pretty well-known when it comes to budget PC and console controllers. The Spectra Enhanced is in large part the wired controller you'd expect: Xbox-style layout, standard enough facade, and some generic triggers. But look closer and you'll find a few bonus features not yet commonplace.

Most notably, the Spectra lights up. There are seven colours to choose from for the facade: red, orange, yellow, lime, aqua, blue and purple. A nice touch on an otherwise fairly generic-looking design. Then there's the rear of the controller, which offers trigger locks and remappable grip buttons. Two features you'd only expect on more premium gear. The PowerA does feel a little cheaper than its contemporary console counterparts, but we like it because it offers something a little different in a pinch.

The slightly updated Infinity Enhanced model also comes with more colours and XSX-specific features for the same price.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → **Great button feel**
- → **200% more colourful than most**
- → **Feels a little cheap**

SPECS WEIGHT: 447G / **CONNECTIVITY:** MICRO USB / **FEATURES:** LED EDGE-LIGHTING, 3-WAY TRIGGER LOCKS

DualSense Wireless

SONY **$99**

An impressively well thought out controller

6 The DualSense is a massive step up from the DualShock 4 that came bundled with every PS4 console. Not only has the former's wiry shape been filled out for more form-fitting ergonomics with the PS5 pad, but that extra space has been packed with motors and mechanisms for more immersive haptics and context-adaptive triggers. Some of which you can experience on PC.

I'll admit, the list of PC games that support the unique features of the DualSense is pretty slim today – *Metro Exodus: Enhanced Edition* is the primary proponent on PC. That said, it's still early days for Steam's improved support for the controller. More games are likely to deliver expanded support in the future, and if it were to gain traction on PC then it'd be ready to take it to the Xbox controllers on a whole new level.

The DualSense does lack the bespoke wireless connectivity offered by the Xbox pads on PC, however, which is just that little bit more limiting.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → **Adaptive triggers**
- → **Haptic rumble**
- → **Best in class**

SPECS WEIGHT: 210G / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB TYPE-C, BLUETOOTH / **BATTERY:** RECHARGEABLE / **FEATURES:** TOUCHPAD, HAPTICS, ADAPTIVE TRIGGERS

GROUP TEST

GAMING CHAIRS

How to pick a styling seat.

By Jorge Jimenez

The best gaming chair can round off your PC gaming setup (and prevent you from rounding off your spine). That's something we can all appreciate. We're not just talking about the most luxurious gaming chairs in this group test, either. There's everything from gaming thrones to humble office chairs in the running to be the best for your back.

1

HEY YOU, SIT UP STRAIGHT!

One thing a great gaming chair can't do is teach healthy posture. And don't think just because you've bought the best it means you can get away with slouching. You can't. That's why we've spoken with ergonomist Melissa Afterman to find out the best ways to maintain a healthy seating position while PC gaming.

Here's how you should do it:

1. Your knees should be bent at 90 degrees, and your feet flat on the floor.

2. Your elbows should be level with your desk and close to your body (meaning that you shouldn't have to extend your arms to reach your mouse and keyboard).

3. Your shoulders should be relaxed.

4. Your lower back should be supported. If your chair doesn't have built-in lumbar support, a small pillow can do the job.

5. Your monitor should positioned such that you don't have to tilt your head up.

Titan Softweave

SECRETLAB **$619**

PC PowerPlay POWER AWARD

Simply the best

1 Secretlab's Omega has been our top pick for the longest time, basically since we first reviewed it back in 2018. But now, ever since the Softweave version of the Secretlab Titan has slid beneath our butts, we don't ever want to stand up again.

Some of that success comes down to its lumbar support, which rivals those you'd find on far more expensive chairs. But the Softweave version of the Titan also offers extra temperature regulation, and a downright luxury feel, to make it worth the extra expense. The Titan is also very similar in design to the Secretlab Omega but has been created for the larger frame. Part of that means you don't get the somewhat restrictive racing seat that clamps around your thighs, offering a much more comfortable experience whether or not you're a larger human. It even allows you to sit cross-legged. We cannot vouch for the ergonomics of sitting cross-legged, but we can vouch for the superb comfort and quality of the Secretlab Titan Softweave.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Comfortable temperature regulation
- → Built-in adjustable lumbar
- → Up to five-year warranty

SPECS SEAT TYPE: RACING BACK, LEVELLED SEAT BASE / RECLINE: 165 DEGREES / WEIGHT CAPACITY: 130KG / WEIGHT: 35KG / AVAILABLE COLOURS: BLACK, COOKIES AND CREAM, CHARCOAL BLUE

Embody

LOGITECH G X HERMAN MILLER **$1,850**

Effective ergonomics

2 Perhaps you've heard of the Herman Miller Embody. It has long been a champion of office life for fancy workplaces, winning favour among corporations for its long-lasting comfort and quality. It's those same qualities that make it a great among gamers, too, and Herman Miller has since teamed up with Logitech G to make something tailor-made for our gaming rumps.

Admittedly, the Logitech G x Herman Miller Embody doesn't differ much from its commercial cousin. That's hardly a mark against it, however. The Embody's back support and absurdly high quality make a welcome return but it now comes with a few more flourishes to win over gamers. Namely, extra cooling material that helps support a more active gaming position. The tried and tested Embody design is simply one of the best chairs for office work or gaming. It's incredibly comfortable over prolonged use, supports an active and healthy posture, and is easily fitted to your frame. The warranty is a standout feature at 12 years, too.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Stimulates blood and oxygen flow
- → Unrivaled back support
- → 12-year/24hr use warranty

SPECS SEAT TYPE: TASK CHAIR / MATERIAL: MULTI-LAYER FABRIC / WEIGHT CAPACITY: 135KG / WEIGHT: 23KG

IT'S POSSIBLE TO TWEAK THE LEVEL OF LUMBAR SUPPORT TO YOUR LIKING

Hero

NOBLECHAIRS **$599**

Typical style, atypical back support

3 The Noblechairs Hero takes back support seriously. While not the most exciting of chairs, or the sportiest, it certainly does a good job of taking care of your back with an adjustable lumbar support built into the rear of the backrest. Through a mechanically satisfying clicky dial on it's side, it's possible to tweak the level of lumbar support to your liking.

The Hero also benefits from a wide seat surface, long-lasting materials and a firm yet comfortable construction. Speaking of which, the Hero is easy enough to assemble, although you may want a little help attaching the backrest to the seat. You really don't want to pull your back out while setting up your ergonomic gaming chair.

Aside from that, it has a decent recline and fully adjustable wrist-rests. It's heavy but glides pretty easily on the supplied casters. It'll look just fine in both an office or gaming setup, so you're getting a chair that can do both. Not bad, if you can afford it. However, the armrests could be a bit more comfier.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Great for lumbar support
- → Ideal for larger frames
- → Has a firm seat and back-rest

SPECS SEAT TYPE: RACING SEAT / RECLINE: 90-135 DEGREES / WEIGHT CAPACITY: 150KG / WEIGHT: 28KG / AVAILABLE COLOURS: BLACK, BLACK AND RED / BLUE / PLATINUM / GOLD

NeueChair

NEUECHAIR **$899**

Plain office chair or gaming hero?

4 If you're the sort of person who prioritises functionality over flash, the NeueChair is an excellent option. This isn't to say it's not stylish – quite the opposite. The NeueChair comes in a sleek, muted obsidian or flashy chrome/silver. Both with bold, sweet curved supports on the back and an attractive black mesh. More importantly, the NeueChair is built to last, with a heavy, sturdy industrial construction. Even the chair's weight in the packaging indicates a solid piece of carefully constructed industrial art: it's heavy and substantial.

Assembling is a breeze. It comes in two discrete pieces and is simply a matter of inserting the casters and pushing them together. Almost every aspect of the seat is adjustable, from the armrests to the adjustable lumbar support system that lets you change the height depth of the backrest. It's one of the best office chairs we've ever had the pleasure to sit in, and if you can afford the admittedly steep price tag, well worth the investment.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Ridiculously sturdy and well made
- → Comfortable and supportive
- → Highly adjustable

SPECS SEAT TYPE: TASK CHAIR / RECLINE: 85–130 DEGREES / WEIGHT CAPACITY: 109KG / WEIGHT: 29KG / AVAILABLE COLOURS: SILVER, OBSIDIAN

Kaiser 2

ANDASEAT **$449**

Big and tall bliss

5 If you're a big and tall gamer, you might have noticed that there aren't many gaming chairs catered to your build. Whether it's a lower weight capacity or too short, or even feels like it'll break as soon as you sit in it, it might feel like you're doomed to lacklustre sitting arrangements.

Well, sorry, we won't stand for that. There are in fact many gaming chairs that will support bigger builds, including the Kaiser 2 featured here.

The AndaSeat Kaiser 2 screams large and in charge, supporting gamers up to 180kg and 7ft tall. The Kaiser 2 is built on a solid steel frame with oversized bars to provide support.

Covered in premium PVC leather and extra thick memory foam cushioning, the Kaiser 2 manages to look more like a gaming chair for grownups. Available in black and a lovely maroon, no more will have to stuff yourself into a tiny gaming chair and hope for the best. The Kaiser 2 manages to offer the function, comfort, and style that you want in your premium gaming chair.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Sturdy
- Perfect for big and tall gamers
- Extra large lumbar support

SPECS SEAT TYPE: RACING SEAT / MATERIAL: PVC LEATHER / WEIGHT CAPACITY: 180KG / WEIGHT: 33KG

T3 Rush

CORSAIR **$399**

Simple and straightforward

6 Corsair's lineup of premium gaming chairs has gotten a much-needed visual improvement with the T3 Rush. The T3 Rush is an insanely comfy chair thanks to its memory foam lumbar pillow but, more importantly, uses a breathable soft fabric in place of the usual faux leather.

The benefit of this breathable fabric is that it retains less heat, keeping you fresh and comfy instead of sweating on squeaky pleather. It also simply looks great, and is a welcome departure from the usual faux leather chairs we see all too often. The Rush also reclines to a ridiculous 180 degrees in case you wanted to lie back and take a comfy cat nap before you take on another marathon streaming session of *Apex Legends* or *CS: GO*.

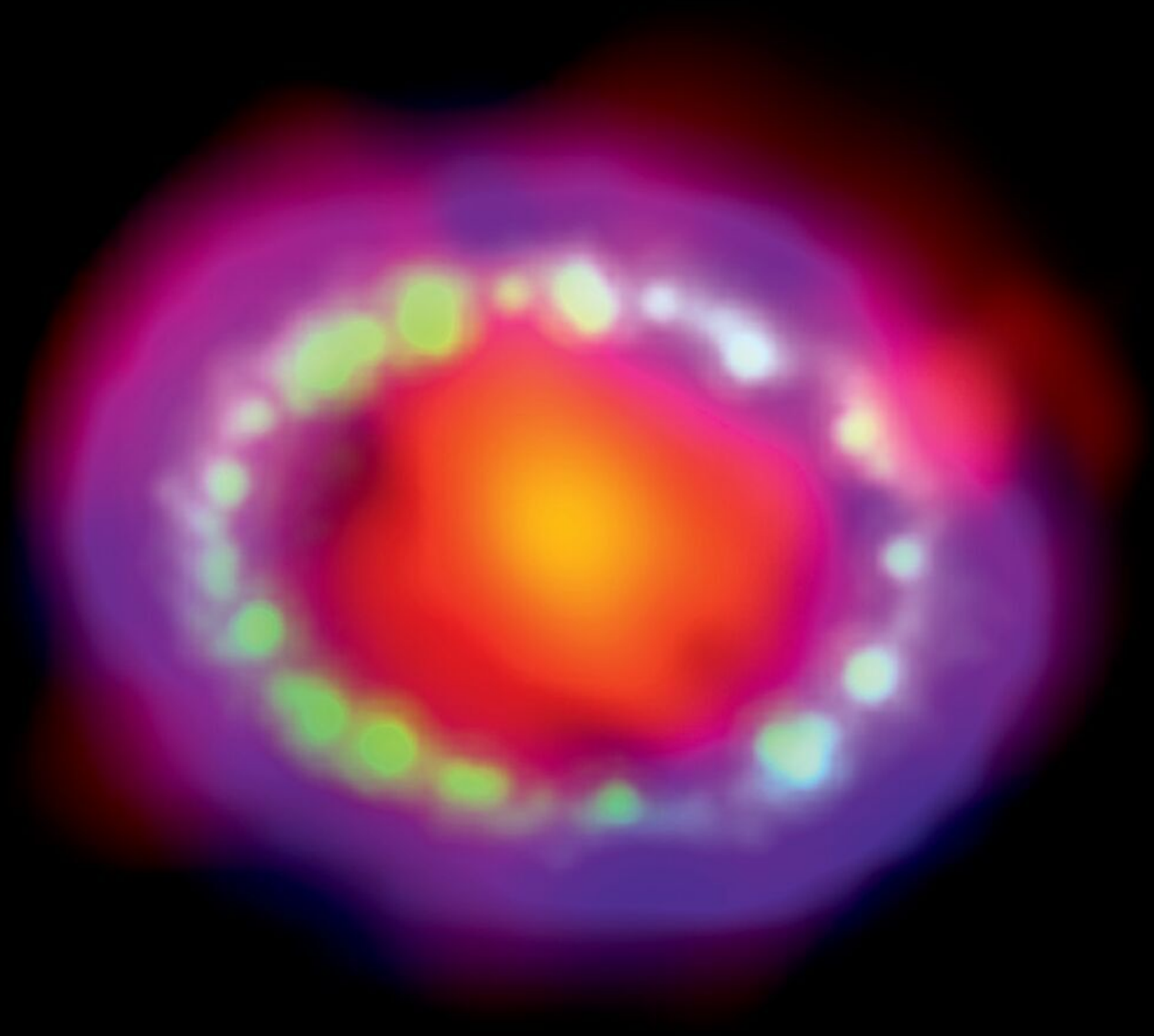
The only major downside for the T3 Rush mostly fits for smaller framed users. If you require a little larger seat, the T3 will be an uncomfortably tight fit. Other than that, the T3 Rush is an impressive-looking gaming chair that doesn't need a loud colour to make a statement.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Breathable soft fabric
- 4D armrests
- Memory foam lumbar pillow

SPECS SEAT TYPE: RACING SEAT / RECLINE: 180 DEGREES / WEIGHT CAPACITY: 120KG / WEIGHT: 22.5KG / AVAILABLE COLOURS: CHARCOAL, GRAY/CHARCOAL, GRAY/WHITE

TECH REPORT



Supernova 1987a, the most recently observed supernova, took place in the Large Magellanic Cloud.

Image credit: NASA

MASS EFFECTS

How VOLUNTEER COMPUTING is narrowing down the search for neutron stars

Folding@Home, the distributed computing project that's taking on COVID, cancer, and all kinds of other diseases through the power of unused graphic cards and idle CPU cores, has been in the headlines a lot recently, not only for creating the world's first exascale supercomputer, but for its recent paper in Nature in which it set out potential targets for new drugs within the spike protein of SARS-Cov-2, which the virus uses to burrow into our cells and cause COVID-19.

But what if your thinking transcends Earthly disease and wants to roam wider? What if you want to join Tim Curry's Anatoly Cherdenko in spaaaace? Well, with the demise of SETI@Home, you're no longer able to hunt for signals from alien civilisations, but you can probe the mysteries of gravitational waves and neutron stars with Einstein@Home. (There are many other projects, including a neat one, Leela Chess Zero, that's teaching computers to play chess.)

Einstein@Home takes data from various sources, including the Arecibo radio telescope we've covered in these pages before its untimely collapse. It then processes this data looking for pulsars, the rapidly spinning neutron stars discovered in 1967 by Jocelyn Bell (her male PhD supervisor was awarded the Nobel prize for her work in 1974, because cough, cough, cough) using the Arecibo telescope.

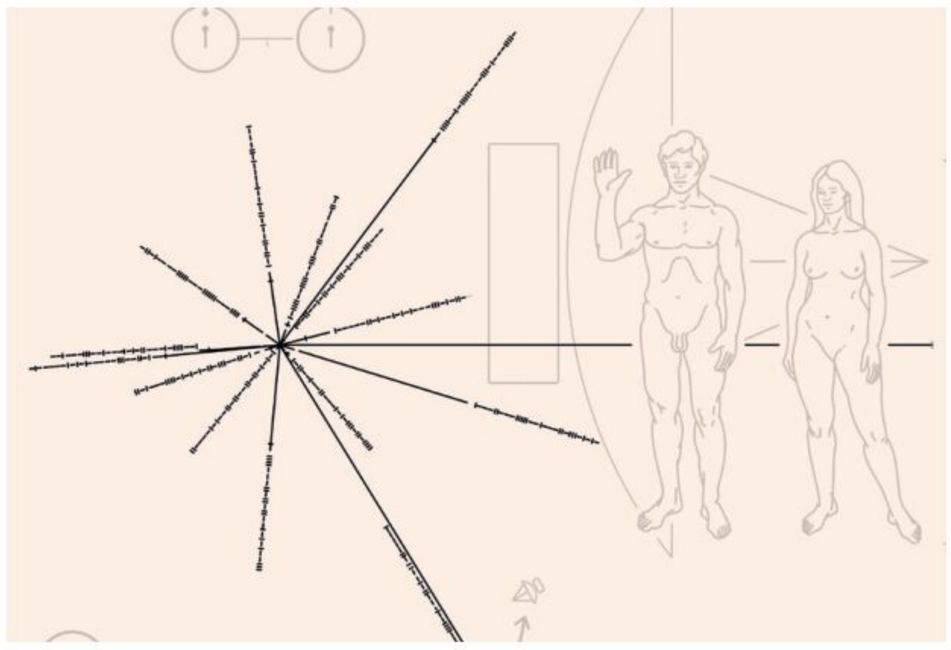
The idea for Einstein@Home came from a conversation in 1999 between physicist Bruce Allen, currently director of the Max Planck Institute for Gravitational Physics in Hannover Germany (while we're talking about PhD supervisors, Allen's was Stephen Hawking), and a friend. SETI@Home had been mentioned in the LA Times, but because studying gravity wasn't considered as 'cool' as searching for aliens, the idea was dropped. The idea resurfaced in 2004, when Allen was put in touch with David Anderson from UC Berkeley, the man behind the BOINC software used by many distributed computing efforts. Einstein launched in 2005, and the rest is history. Or, given the wibbly-wobbly nature of time at the quantum level, possibly not.

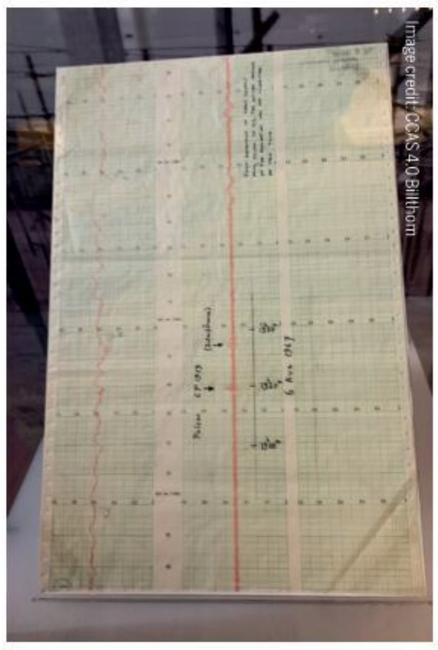
Studying pulsars and gravitational waves in this way requires plenty of computation time, however, and running the racks of equipment needed to create a modern supercomputer takes, according to Allen's estimate, over 2.6 million euros a year just in electricity costs. Far better, then, to farm the work out to volunteers, using the spare capacity of computers that were running anyway.

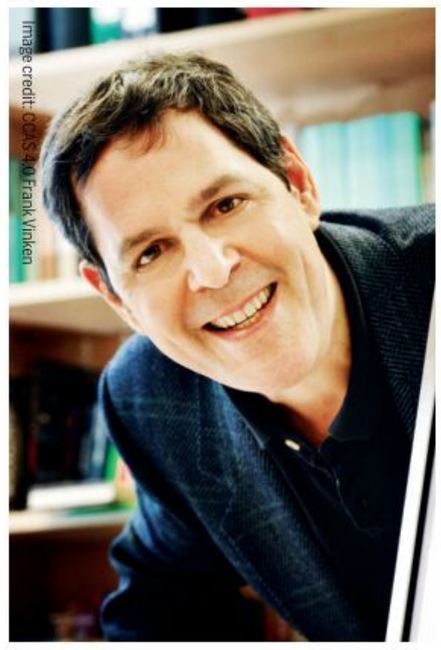
A pulsar is a spinning neutron star. It acts something like a lighthouse, producing a beam of radiation from its magnetic poles (some emit visible light, others radio waves, X-rays, gamma rays...) that washes across the Earth. This looks to us like a light flashing on and off quickly and regularly (the Crab Pulsar spins once every 33ms). This speed and regularity

Neutron star?

Neutron stars are stars that have undergone gravitational collapse to the extent that the electrons, which usually orbit at a small distance from the protons and neutrons in the atomic nucleus, are forced to merge with the protons, creating nothing but neutrons. A neutron star 20km in diameter could weigh as much as one and a half times the mass of our Sun (diameter: 1.4 million km).







FAR LEFT: The plaque aboard the Pioneer spacecraft shows the position of Earth triangulated from the positions of 14 pulsars.

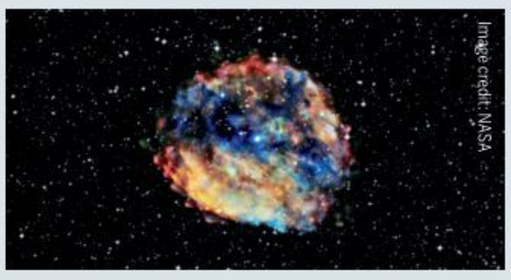
MIDDLE: The chart on which Jocelyn Bell recorded her first data from pulsar PSR B1919+21 in 1967. It was initially called LGM, for 'Little Green Men', such was the regularity of its signal.

FEEL THE PULSE *Pulsars light up the night sky*

THE CRAB PULSAR
The Crab Pulsar is the remains of a supernova widely observed on Earth in the year 1054.

PSR B1509-58
An image from NASA's Chandra X-ray Observatory of PSR B1509-58, a spinning neutron star.

SXP 1062
This pulsar is in another galaxy – SXP 1062 is in the Small Magellanic Cloud, a satellite galaxy of the Milky Way.



RCW 103
A supernova remnant 9,000 lightyears from Earth, this cloud contains one of the slowest pulsars ever discovered.

offers a way to study gravitational waves, the new hotness in physics that act like ripples in spacetime, expanding and contracting the distance between objects as they pass by and therefore interfering with the regularity of the pulses.

Pulsars don't actually generate gravitational waves themselves though, at least not that we can yet detect. Previous gravitational wave discoveries have come from one-off events, such as the merger of two enormous black holes that caused spacetime itself to ring like a bell. The discovery of continuous gravitational waves from a spinning object would be big news, as Allen explains, "The first detection was announced in February 2016, and since that time about 100 other signals have been detected. And they're similar in nature, they're either two black holes merging together, or two neutron stars merging together, they last a very short time and then they're gone.

"What we're looking for now, is what would happen if you had a spinning neutron star with a little mountain on it, a little bump. As that rotates, that little bump makes it wobble a little bit. And that wobbling radiates gravitational waves. And that would give us a picture of what's going on inside the star, so this would be a way of studying the properties of a star that we can't see otherwise."

And when Allen says a 'little bump', he's not kidding. "A neutron star is about ten kilometres in radius. We know, based on the searches that we've done, that they are round to about one part in ten to the eighth power, which means the mountains aren't bigger than a tenth of a millimetre." That's an interesting definition of a mountain, but the data to support it comes from Einstein@Home – from the PCs of people like those who read this mag. If the bumps on a neutron star were any bigger, the thinking goes, they'd have been detected by now.

STUDYING PULSARS IN THIS WAY REQUIRES PLENTY OF COMPUTATION TIME

STAR TURN

That kind of mind-blowing fact is part of the reason it's important to study gravitational waves. Folding@Home has the USP of helping cure disease. SETI@Home was about finding aliens, who wasn't going to sign up to that? Einstein@Home is a trickier sell. "We all walk around with a picture of the world around us," says Allen. "The Earth isn't flat, the Moon isn't made of green cheese, things like that. Your notion of what the universe is is part of how you understand the world, and what we're doing here is a very small step towards understanding the world a little bit better. It doesn't improve our lives from day to day, but I do think it's actually an important part of human culture. When we discover, hopefully, continuous gravitational waves one day, it's gonna be a footnote in history, but people will go on to use those to study and learn more about neutron stars, and from there learn about other very dense matter. It's little steps. We think in our galaxy there are about 100 million pulsars, of which we've detected around 3,000 because they happened to be spinning at the right rate."

Einstein@Home has been publishing several papers a year (four in 2020) detailing its discoveries and there is so much more to be discovered. While Folding@Home is tackling an acute crisis down on Earth, it's good to know that others have their heads in the sky, making discoveries for no other reason than to expand the sphere of human knowledge. ■

Ian Evenden

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CRUSADER KINKS

PART I

Spreading the love throughout Paradox's medieval soap opera, *Crusader Kings III*

By Rick Lane

A wise man once said "Make love, not war". That man would probably have died in a week in *Crusader Kings III*'s world, but that is not to say he didn't have a point. All this scheming, fighting, and murder... where is the compassion for one's fellow man?

I want to spread some love through the world of *Crusader Kings*, and I'm going to do it by creating the horniest dynasty in all of Christendom. I plan to take the game's reputation as a dynamic bastard simulator literally, and attempt to conquer the world with the fruit of my loins, pushing the game's relationship systems to their limits.

Before I start, first I need a ruler and a place for them to rule. I set the game to begin in the fateful year 1066, opting to play as the King of Scotland. This gives me a prestigious enough position so there's plenty to do, but I'm still small fry compared to states like Byzantium or the Holy Roman Empire.

Rather than use the default ruler for that period in Scotland's history, I instead create my own, specifically a strapping 27 year old with a beard you could lose a cat in. I set his sexuality to bisexual, as it increases his romance opportunities, then add the 'lustful' trait to his personality. I pick two further personality traits out of a hat, ending up with 'cynical' and 'wrathful'.

LUST IN TRANSLATION

As for more general traits, I select three that will best aid his romantic aspirations, namely Seducer, Schemer, and Legendary Reveller. This results in a high Intrigue Stat, so to balance things out I give him poor Diplomacy and Stewardship, average Learning, and good Martial. Basically, he's Game of Thrones' Robert Baratheon, but with the circumspect mind of Varys the Spider.

All I need now is a name. First name has to be Randy. It has to be. As for Randy's surname, I let *CKIII*'s name generator take care of that. After cycling through a bunch of highly Scottish surnames – Abernathy, Arbuthnot, etc, it suggests Cockburn. King Randy Cockburn. You can almost smell the nominative determinism.

King Randy Cockburn begins his reign single and childless. While I reckon he'd personally be fine with that scenario, the game's rules are not. If Randy dies without an heir, it's game over. Therefore, my first goal is to find a wife and make some babies. After scrolling through a list of potential suitors, I select Infanta Ximena Gartziez of House Navarra. According to her character page, she's a glutton and a sadist. But she's also 21 and hornier than a Triceratops. Come to me, my lusty evil monster wife.

With matrimonial duties arranged, my other task is to select a Lifestyle for Randy. This is made easy thanks to his absurdly high Intrigue stat, for which there are three 'focus' trees. One of these focuses is Temptation, which commits your ruler to a life of "seduction, desire, and the gentle art of twisting people around your little finger". Sold to the drooling ginger man on the throne!

THE RULES

1. Ruler can only marry characters with the lustful trait (and if possible should have it themselves).
2. If romantic opportunities arise, they must be pursued.
3. Chaste characters must be expelled from court.

KING RANDY COCKBURN BEGINS HIS REIGN SINGLE AND CHILDLESS

Basic admin done, it's time to plan the broader objectives for Randy's reign. There are two goals I'd like to achieve before he dies. First, I'd like to conquer the rest of Scotland, which is currently shared between myself, Norway, and a throng of Scots and Irish nobles. Second, I want to produce as many children as I possibly can. For the sake of my dynasty, of course.

ALL'S FAIR

No sooner has Randy saddled up his breeches, however, when he's confronted by two immediate problems. The first is that Scotland is on the brink of civil war, thanks to a local noble forming a faction dedicated to removing Randy from the throne. My first thought is to start a scheme to seduce Duke Mael-Snechtai, but he's heterosexual. So I hatch a scheme to murder him instead. After bribing some of his courtiers to join the scheme, they arrange for him to be attacked by bandits while on the road. The moment he's dead, the faction disbands.

Not exactly the loving start to my reign that I wanted, but sometimes needs must. Speaking of needs, my other problem is that Queen Ximena doesn't seem especially pregnant, so Randy is forced to begin a scheme to seduce

St Johnston
To the charming Randy.
Thank you so much for the poem on the joys of life you gave me. I can scarce remember the last time I received such a wonderful gift!
Signed,
Queen Ximena Gartziez of Scotland
Anything for you, Ximena.
• The Scheme Seduce Queen Ximena gains Budding Interest
Details Map
Selecting: Holdings
6th of June, 1068 AD

TOP: Young King Randy. Pantless, as is his wont.

LEFT: I hope this makes up for the terrible weather.

Personal Adventures In Games

RANDY'S STATS	Age by diary end:	Wives:	Legitimate children:	Illegitimate children:	Total affairs:	Ongoing lovers:	Territorial conquests:	Territorial losses:	Murders:	Illnesses:
	45	1	6	3	6	3	6	2	1	1

his own wife. He could also romance her, which would make her his soulmate. But I'm not interested in soulmates. I'm interested in children, and the process through which children are created.

Seducing your own wife is not exactly the behaviour of a legendary Lothario, and it appears King Randy knows this. No sooner has he embarked on the scheme, he wonders whether it's time to go through his neglected portrait collection to find himself a new lover (basically the medieval equivalent of scrolling through Tinder). I say what better time could there possibly be?

Randy can choose three potential suitors from his collection before making a final decision. The first portrait is from Countess Esclarmonda, the wife of the Count of Auvergne. She's sent Randy a full-on nude, causing him to swipe right faster than a southpaw boxer. The next couple are both attractive ladies, but are described as having personalities blacker than space, so he declines those. But the fourth portrait makes Randy's heart skip a beat.

It's the King of Sweden.

Clad in a chainmail vest and a rounded helmet with a neatly manicured blond beard, King Erik II is the epitome of Nordic strength and beauty. Randy goes through the motions of picking a third finalist, but his decision has already been made. Not only does a dalliance with a fellow monarch fire Randy's imagination, having a king in his bed could also be useful from a political perspective. He scribes a sensuous letter to Erik, and quickly receives a response. "Your radiant eyes are what gives meaning to my life," Erik writes lustfully.

Randy and Erik officially become lovers, but as kings in separate countries, it'll be a while before they can express their love physically. But for now there are plenty of boring, non-sex-related things to keep Randy's hands occupied, such as declaring war on the Isle of Man. This tiny, 30-kilometre strip of land between Britain and Ireland is barely worth fighting over. But it's also the only claim Randy can realistically press at the moment, and by gum he's going to press it.

While conquering the island of three-legged men and no-tailed cats, Randy receives some good news. Queen Ximena is up the duff. He's only halfway through his bizarre seduction scheme too. Not that he plans to stop. That wouldn't be his style.

True to form, it isn't long before someone else catches Randy's roving eye. In this case, it's his chancellor, Duke Gospatric. Gospatric piques Randy's interest after a deft bit of diplomacy frees the king to declare war on the Isle of Man a second time (despite having already conquered it). Some time later, a tedious feast is brought to life by Gospatric's sparkling reading of Niebelungenlied, which as everyone knows is guaranteed to get the juices flowing.

MEMBER STATES

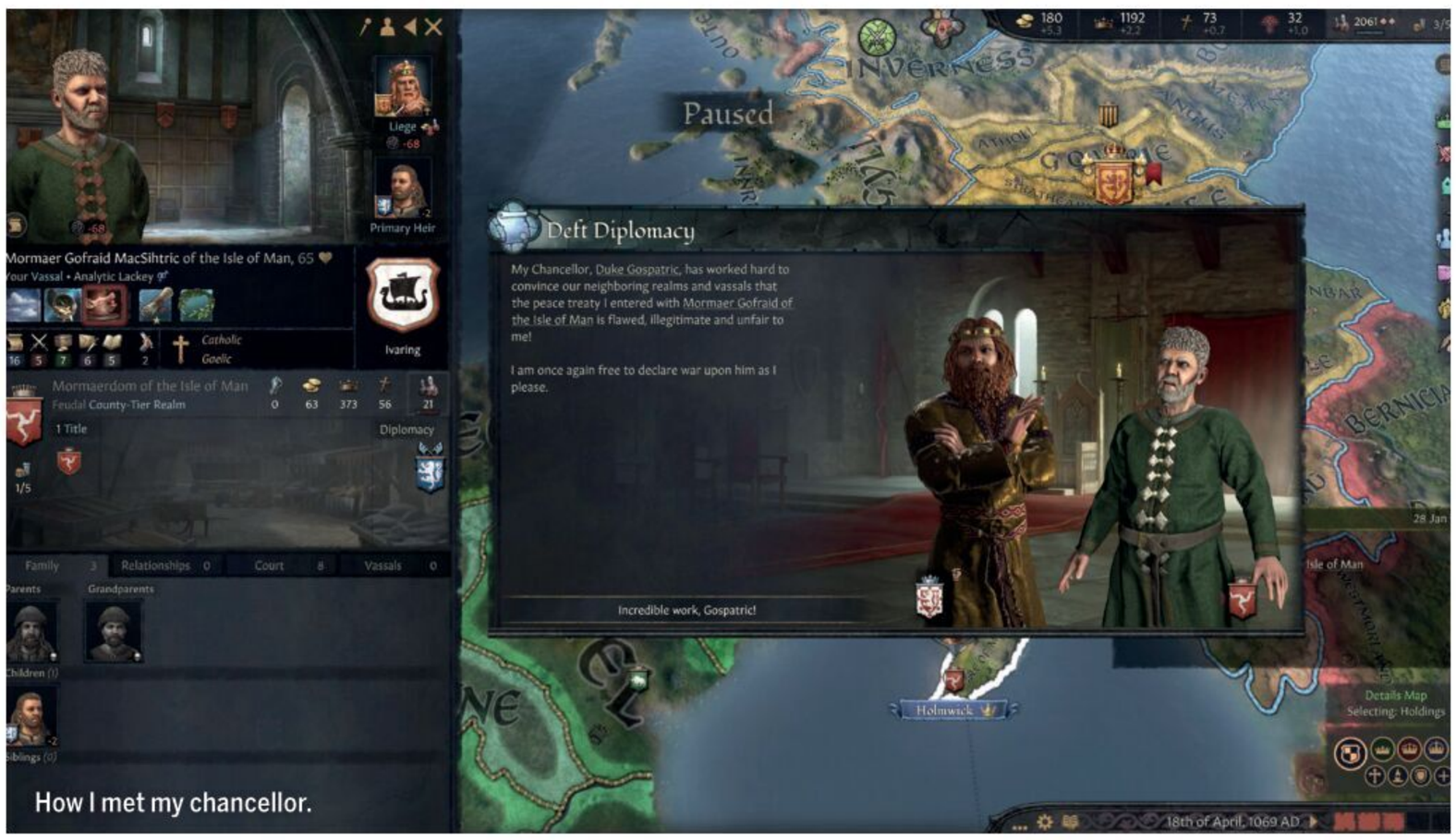
The relationships intensifies quickly from there. Gospatric starts following Randy around like a lost puppy, and it's a matter of days before they take to the bedchamber. As Randy himself puts it, "No sound has ever inspired such lust in me as the words he now whispers in my ear. There is no hesitation. No delay. No time for gentleness. There is only my desire." Crikey.

You might think that a wife, a king, and a chancellor might be enough to satisfy Randy's carnal cravings. And you would be wrong. No sooner has he clambered out of bed with Gospatric, Randy spies a female courtier named Malmure who shares his lustful personality. It doesn't take much to sway her – a rousing performance of The Song of Roland is enough to convince her.

While hopping between the beds of Gospatric and Malmure, Randy somehow finds time to press a claim on the province of Argyll. At the same time, however, Duke Morcar of Westmoreland snatches Cumberland from the southern border, but Randy can't do much about it because he's tied up in Argyll (possibly literally if Gospatric is with him).

Randy is distracted from his many affairs by the death of his archbishop. It isn't the deceased Stigand himself who's the problem – the man was a creaking irrelevance. It's the new bishop, Beorhthem, who inexplicably accuses Randy of incest. It's about the only sin Randy hasn't committed. Randy easily blows off Beorhthelm's nonsense. And no, not in that way.

Spurious accusations dealt with, Randy is free to enjoy the fruits of his labours. And Ximenas. She gives birth to a daughter, named Rodina, followed by a son a year later, named after his father. Slightly less welcome is the news that Malmure has given birth to a bastard. Randy considers



How I met my chancellor.

ROSS
INVERNESS
BUCHAN
MEARNS
CARRICK
ANNANDALE
Greetings King Randy of Scotland,
It is my duty to inform you that irrefutable evidence has been unveiled proving that your marriage with Queen Ximena is consanguineous in nature. This information will stay between the two of us if you end this unholy union at once.
Signed,
Archbishop Beorhthelm of Scotland
-30
Of course, Beorhthelm.
Our marriage will not be torn apart by such an obvious lie!
To lie about such a thing... I will set him straight.
Surely this can all be... forgotten?
Siege of Annan Lost
Beorhthelm loses 10 Opinion of you (+1.20/year) (Refusal)
Intrigue Challenge against Beorhthelm
Possible Outcomes:
100% – I prove that the claim is fake:
Beorhthelm spends 350
0% – The claim is indeed irrefutable:
You gain the Trait Incestuous
You lose 1 Level(s) of Devotion
You spend 350
Queen Ximena Gartziez of Scotland:
Gains the Trait Incestuous
Loses 1 Level(s) of Devotion
25th of February, 1071 AD

ABOVE: Bishop Prick.

EVEN RANDY WONDERS HOW MUCH LONGER HE CAN KEEP ALL THESE AFFAIRS UP

claiming the boy as his own, but he's unsure what the ramifications will be, so he decides to keep it secret.

Like the bellies of Ximena and Malmure, Randy's realm continues to expand. Successful wars are fought against the houses of Carrick and Galloway, meaning the only parts of Scotland Randy doesn't control are the Hebrides, the southwest coast, and the northernmost tip. Oh, and Dunbar, which Duke Morcar nibbles off as he did with Cumberland. This is the last claim Morcar can press, however, so Randy reluctantly concedes.

Randy returns from his victories to find more children waiting for him. Ximena has given birth to a daughter, who, thanks to a slip of the keyboard, I accidentally name 'Helen\'. Meanwhile, Malmure is pregnant again, assuring Randy it is his. While still not claiming his illegitimate offspring, Randy at least finds Malmure a husband to take care of her. He doesn't stop shagging her, though, impregnating her a third time behind her poor husband's back.

On the other side of the coin, Gospatric, who apparently lost an eye during Randy's most recent conflicts (at least, I hope that's how he lost it), introduces Randy to a 'friend' named Talore, a barkeep who is apparently capable of pulling kings as well as pints. It's all getting a bit confusing, frankly. Even Randy wonders how much longer he can keep all these affairs up, and the game subtly hints that I drop one of my lovers. "Romance is not about quantity, but quality!" Randy declares, before continuing with all his flings.

On the subject of quality, it's around this time that King Erik of Sweden rolls into town. After years of exchanging love letters and erotic carvings (colloquially known as stick pics), the two kings can finally spend a night of passion together. Randy clears his schedule and eagerly leaps into bed with Erik. Then he immediately leaps back out, horrified to discover that rugged, handsome King Erik is riddled with the pox. Randy cuts off the affair immediately, while Erik slinks back to Sweden with his rotten tail between his legs.

Shaken by his brush with venereal disease, Randy turns his attention to his realm. He has a claim to press on the inner Hebrides, but the current lord of the domain, Petty King Gudrød Haraldsen, is married to the daughter of the King of Norway, resulting in a powerful alliance. Randy doesn't have the military strength to take on Norway. The alliance would be broken, however, if Gudrød's marriage had cause to be annulled...

It's time put Randy's seductive powers to more practical use. ■

CHARACTER HUMANITY IN WILDERMYTH

Heroes are more than stats and numbers on a character sheet. ***By Rachel Watts***

LEFT: Why can't I have the option to choose ALL the abilities.

RIGHT: I can't describe the sheer joy I felt when two of the party fell in love.

I love a fantasy RPG with a good story, but aside from one main dude, it's difficult to give a party of five or more characters their own time in the spotlight. But after playing *Wildermyth*, I came away with loads of stories about my group of hearty adventurers – so many I could write a book. And only after playing a handful of hours, too.

It's kind of incredible how a small games studio from Texas has managed to pull this off. *Wildermyth* uses both crafted tales and procedural stories spun from character-driven traits to create a truly dynamic RPG. Characters fall in love, create bitter rivalries, grow old, have children, make terrible decisions, leave behind legacies, and eventually die. Everything they go through is folded neatly into the major story, and it's spectacular.

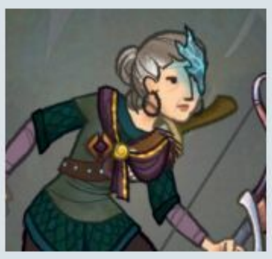
My *Wildermyth* squad is named the Northern Slayers, a rag-tag group of women who enjoy a good punch up and friendly banter. There are hundreds of scripted micro-stories your party will slip into, although conversations change drastically depending on your team's personalities. One member of the crew, a loveable but snarky archer named Tess, had a luck feat and claimed that she could set off in a completely random direction and always come across some treasure. After a short adventure ending with a gorgon battle and zero loot, she didn't half get an earful of playful jests from the rest of the party.

It's these moments that make you feel like your group are actually good friends and not just a bunch of people thrown together for the sake of adventure. The vibe is very much like a D&D homebrew game. You don't just want to get more loot, you want your characters to be challenged, find friendship, and grow as people. They can fall in love and have kids who then join the adventuring gang when they're older. You can also have inter-party rivalries – two people who dislike one another will even gain critical hit buffs in battle as they try to one-up their rival.

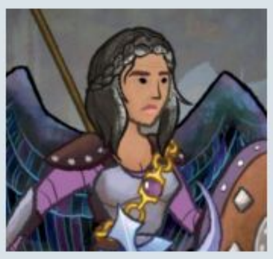
SPELLBOUND *Here's my current badass group of heroes*

ARIANNA
A warrior who loves books and poetry. Realised her lifelong dream of finding the Library of Light and from then on decided to write down the party's adventures.

ELEANOR
A mystic who has a nasty scar, but it doesn't stop her from being a flirt. Nicked an egg from a Crag Eagle and now has a flying bird who brings her treasure.



TESS
A snarky archer that got caught by a gorgon. The monster left a mark on her face that has consumed one of her eyes. Wild at heart and a local legend.



FIONWAY
A rough-tongued blacksmith turned buff warrior. One night she met an old crow-woman who granted her two massive wings, the coolest thing ever.

THE JOURNEY YOUR CREW VENTURES ON TAKES A TOLL ON THE GROUP

The decisions you make in smaller stories will overlap into the larger one, and character developments can lead to some dramatic moments. When someone reaches zero health, you can decide if they die in a blaze of glory on the battlefield or retreat, losing a limb in the process. I made one of my characters withdraw in battle so she wouldn't be slain, and after the fight was over the leader of the party, a buff fighter named Ariana, made a heartfelt apology to the group.

WILD AT HEART

Similar to games like *Darkest Dungeon*, the journey your crew ventures on takes a toll on the group and you start to see scars and permanent injuries on their avatars. Sometimes it's because of a story beat, but more often than not, a character will get a permanent injury due to a bad decision you made on the battlefield.

In between chapters, the land you're protecting goes through a handful of years of peace, meaning your characters get comic book-style panels showing what they got up to in those years of downtime. They can age and even retire – that's until you miss them so much you bring them back as 'legacy heroes' for a new campaign to show the young un's just how it's done, like reviving an old D&D character sheet for fun.

Wildermyth is reminiscent of times playing tabletop RPGs with friends, each person carving their own story, but in *Wildermyth* you have a say in the stories of all the characters, the game working its procedural magic behind the scenes. I've just started on my second run but can already tell I'm going to be in this for the long haul. I can't wait until all my heroes get old and I finally have a group of buff, badass grannies. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE Jun 15, 2021	**DEVELOPER** Worldwalker Games
PUBLISHER In-house	**LINK** wildermyth.com

LEFT: A map showing the surrounding lands and the danger that approaches.

FAR RIGHT: The graphics may be cutesy, but battles are always a brutal affair.

Coming soon

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